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"WARHORSE STUDIOS IS DELIVERING THE GAME IT ALWAYS WANTED TO"



The original *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* was notable for putting medieval realism and authenticity over the traditional fantasy trappings of sword-and-shield RPGs. And, despite being markedly rough around the edges on its release, it delivered a virtual medieval world that was incredibly immersive.

Now, though, Warhorse

Studios is delivering the game it always wanted to make, with *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* taking its gripping gaming experience to wondrous new heights. Get the full inside scoop, starting on page 42. Enjoy!

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team



JOSH WOLLENS
Twitter
@joshuawollens

This month
Fought mano a mano and barechested with Hideo Kojima on top of PC Gamer Towers. Sweaty.



HARVEY RANDALL
Twitter
@HJRwithpen

This month
Got pummelled by a series of beefy wuxia bosses. Oh, and in *Phantom Blade Zero* he...



PHIL SAVAGE
Twitter
@Octaeder

This month
Tried, and then failed miserably within three seconds, not to compare *Avowed* to *Skyrim*.



KARA PHILLIPS
Twitter
@KaraPhillipsA

This month
Realised that pooping on strangers' heads is great fun. We've told her about that.

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



The face that launched a thousand memes.

STARR-MAKING ROLE

Final Fantasy XVI's **BEN STARR** talks becoming a meme and dating summons

You can't fault Ben Starr's commitment to the bit. Since lending his voice to Clive Rosfield in *Final Fantasy XVI*, Starr has cemented himself as a fan-favourite voice actor: from shitposting on Twitter, to cosplaying as Tifa, to becoming a whole-ass meme thanks to a particularly bright light at The Game Awards. I couldn't help but ask about all of it when I sat down to chat with him ahead of *Final Fantasy XVI*'s PC release.

"I didn't know what was going on because I was like, 'I'm gonna put

my phone away, I'm just gonna enjoy the night...' And yeah, this guy tapped me on the shoulder, and went, 'Excuse me, you're a meme'. Then I looked at my phone and it had just blown up and I went, 'Oh my God.'"

Starr enjoyed "how inventive people were" with the image of him

**"IF I CAN BE A
VECTOR OF JOY FOR
PEOPLE, THAT'S ALL
I CARE ABOUT"**

bathed in light, from turning him into a *Kingdom Hearts* character to the all-too-real moment where the Bandai Namco splash screen burns your retinas at 2am. "People were using it everywhere, and I think that's so lovely because I try not to take myself very seriously," Starr said. "If I can be a vector of joy for people, that's all I care about. I do this stuff because I want people to see that I'm happy to be silly and happy to take the piss out of myself - I'm always going to take the work incredibly seriously, but I'm never going to take myself seriously because being a clown is fun and I love it."

COCKS-ING IT ALL UP

DUNGEONS AI DRAGONS



Despite Wizards of the Coast getting roasted repeatedly for accidental uses of the stuff, Hasbro CEO Chris Cocks is really into AI. In a Goldman Sachs conference, Cocks cited his fellow "30 or 40" players were using it, so Hasbro ought to, as well. "We will deploy it significantly," he said. Gulp. ■ **HR**

STARFALL

ERDTREE GETS NERFED



Already beaten *Erdtree*? You now have unlimited bragging rights. FromSoft put out a patch nerfing the DLC's final boss that makes him a bit less ridiculous to fight, with more readable animations and less damage. Get your "I beat him pre-patch" T-shirts printed now, folks. ■ **JW**

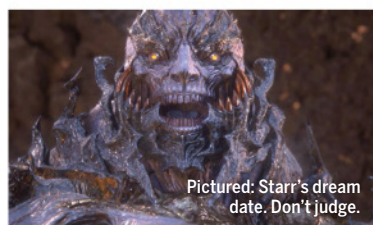


AI'LL SORT IT

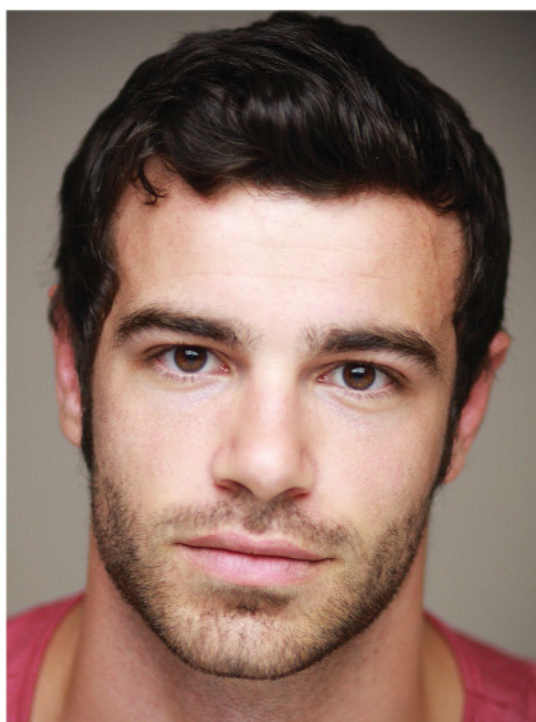
FIX IT IN POST



Nvidia's CEO reckons AI is rather rad. Huang said, "We can't do computer graphics any more without artificial intelligence. We compute one pixel, we infer the other 32." Sure, some games practically demand DLSS, but can we really say AI has played a huge role in gaming just yet? ■ **JR**



Pictured: Starr's dream date. Don't judge.



TOP RIGHT: Clive's a serious chap, unlike his voice actor.

IFRIT AIN'T BROKE

When it comes to Clive, Starr says he was "very fortunate" to be handed a character so well-written. "Hopefully, going forward, I can kind of continue to embrace those roles that feel authentic, because it starts with the quality of the writing that kind of just needs me to say a couple of lines to make it work," he tells me.

Starr was a *Final Fantasy* fan even before starring in one, and with *Final Fantasy XVI* being so summon-centric I wanted to know which one was his favourite... to take out on a date, of course. "I'm going rock climbing with Titan," Starr says with zero hesitation. After mulling over the question for a few moments, though, he has something a little different in mind.

MY LOVELY HORSE

"I'd love to just ride through the Alps with Ixion, just like wind in the hair... nothing but a horse and a dream," Starr says. "Can you imagine if I was Clive? Clive's luscious hair just like, blowing in the wind, riding Ixion. The Hills are Alive with the Sound of Music, Clive riding Ixion. Fan art, please."

Someone make it happen, will ya? Because that has to be seen by everybody. ■

Mollie Taylor

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

A dead cert

Anti-cheat is coming to *Deadlock*.

It half-lives!

Fan-made *Half-Life 2: Episode 3* effort *Project Borealis* has returned to life after years of silence.

Pay pal

Pocketpair pinky-promises not to turn *Palworld* into an F2P live-service game: "We are not changing our game's business model".

Getting over it

Former Sony Computer Entertainment Europe prez Chris Deering has a message for laid-off devs, "Get over it!"

Ollie ollie...?

Oxenfree will be completely removed from Itch.io next month.

Age of Mythology: Resold

Age of Mythology: Retold is charging \$6 for 22-year-old jpegs, with players calling it "worse than horse armour".

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy is used to crises. Just the other week The Spy managed to just about keep PC Gamer Towers from melting

down after it was discovered that the local branch of Greggs had sold out of Festive Bakes. A true Defcon 1 emergency. The Spy is told that editor Rob still wakes up in cold sweats about it even now.

The Spy's natural hunting ground for crises, though, is within the videogame industry. From operating through the videogame crash of 1983, when The Spy almost got buried alive along with a bunch of unsold *ET* games in a New Mexico desert landfill, to taking cover under John Romero's desk in Chase Tower, Dallas, in 1997 as *Daikatana*'s 'Suck it down' ad campaign was given the green light, through to going undercover as Peter Molyneux's ego during his infamous *Fable* acorn-to-tree promise. The Spy is not only used to being in crisis points, but astute at seeing them coming, too.

Another crisis point incoming in the PC gaming community? Once again, PC gaming component costs, and specifically the graphics card market (dominated like never before by Nvidia, which is announcing its new GeForce 5-series GPUs in late 2024 and early 2025). And, unfortunately, any PC gamers who were holding out for good news on price points are set to be disappointed, with The Spy hearing of prices that will make all but the fattest of wallets weep.

Because, let the Spy tell you, in an age when Sony's latest flagship console, the PS5 Pro, is retailing for £699 (without a physical disc drive present, The Spy notes), and Nvidia's current flagship GPU, the RTX 4090 – which has been on the market for over two years – is still selling at £1,799, over twice the PS5 Pro's price, the idea that Nvidia 5-series cards are going to offer any notable price reductions for PC gamers is absolutely laughable.

BUT CAN IT RUN CRYSIS?

Pivoting from one crisis to another, um, *Crysis*, The Spy donned the PCG Nanosuit and proceeded to infiltrate Crytek's headquarters to get an update on *Crysis 4*.



Deftly sliding by the Yerli brothers, Cevat, Avni and Faruk, as they gathered around the latest copy of PC Gamer magazine in awe, The Spy managed to not only go eyes-on with the latest iteration of CryEngine, which looks absolutely stunning, but also slip into the office of *Crysis 4*'s creative director, Matthias Engström, who has been heading up the project since 2022.

Hacking Engström's computer, The Spy was able to purloin the information that the Crytek team has notably swelled over the last year. The Spy also extracted key features available in the latest version of the CryEngine, which include Physical Based Rendering, 3D HDR Lens Flares, Real Time Local Reflections, Parallax Occlusion Mapping and more. When *Crysis 4* lands, The Spy knows PC gamers

are going to be blown away by it visually. Of course, PC gamers may also be blown away by *Crysis 4* in another way, too, namely their overclocked to high-heaven rig going boom as they try to scrape a 23fps framerate on non-Nvidia 5-series hardware. Remember, coating your rig with cheetah blood does not make it faster. Spy out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY

When in the bath, the Spy eats tiramisu with a long spoon.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

Ryu shows off the game's new lighting changes.



RUN IT BACK

MARVEL VS CAPCOM: INFINITE & BEYOND wants to take you for a ride

Videogames don't usually get second chances. They come out, they succeed or fail, a narrative sets in, and that's it. There are exceptions: *No Man's Sky*, *Final Fantasy XIV*. But those games were saved by the developers and propped up by a dedicated community. If a game is abandoned, slagged off, forgotten... it's largely out of luck. Until recently *Marvel vs Capcom: Infinite* was all three.

But Twitch streamer and fighting game personality Maximilian Dood loves the *Marvel vs Capcom* series so much, he's put together (and is bankrolling) a development team to rescue its unsuccessful final entry. The mod they're producing is called *Infinite & Beyond*, and it's trying to give a forgotten gem another chance.

To understand why this is a big deal you have to understand *Infinite*'s history. *Marvel vs Capcom* is foundational in the fighting game community, so much so that 'When's Mahvel?' became a meme during major tournaments. The beloved *MvC2*, released in 2000, has its own in-joke about Pringles. But decades of love for the crossover tag-team fighting series wasn't enough to save *Infinite*. Released in 2017 as the follow-up to much-loved *Ultimate Marvel vs Capcom 3*, *Infinite* was lambasted for an ugly art style that focused more on matching the MCU

instead of emulating the comic-book visuals the series was known for.

Then there were the roster problems. *Infinite* didn't feature a single member of the X-Men, who had been a defining feature of the series since the start (the first game is literally *X-Men vs Street Fighter*). Folks speculated that Disney and Fox were feuding over the film rights to the X-Men, but the result was a smaller roster than *Marvel vs Capcom 3*. No Cyclops, no Magneto, no Wolvy.

Underneath the bland art, *Marvel vs Capcom: Infinite* was still a unique, well-made fighting game with real depth. Ultimately that didn't matter: it became a meme and Capcom cut off support after one season of DLC characters. The competitive scene dried up. *Marvel vs Capcom* was, effectively, dead.

But over time its reputation began to improve, and the overwhelming sentiment became less 'what a disappointment' and more 'man, *Infinite* deserved better'. When it became clear another *Marvel vs Capcom* game wasn't coming, that sentiment intensified until *MvC*'s biggest cheerleader decided to do something about it.

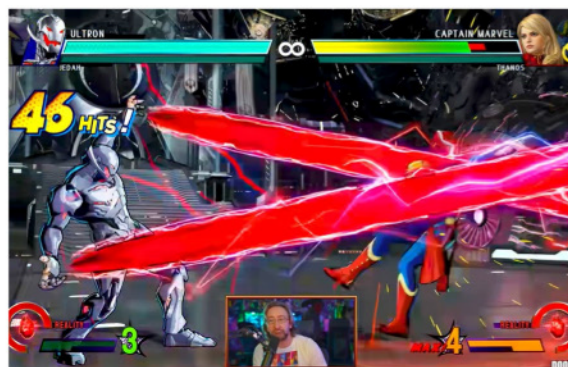
ULTIMATE MARVEL

Marvel vs Capcom: Infinite & Beyond is an incredibly ambitious project: it's not just a visual overhaul that adds cel-shading, reworks the UI, menus and textures, and



Free Play

Despite the amount of time, effort, and money being pumped into *Marvel vs Capcom Infinite & Beyond*, it is still a mod and it will be free when it's finally released on PC (hopefully) later this year. Anyone with the mod will be able to play with anyone else who has it installed, and you can download and test the balance changes now.



FAR LEFT: Characters like Chun-Li have been reworked and de-aged to match the art style from previous *Marvel vs Capcom* games.

LEFT: In addition to a visual overhaul, Ultron has gotten a new battle theme composed by Alex Moukala that plays during matches.

WHEN'S MAHVEL? An (incomplete) history of *Marvel vs Capcom*



1997 MARVEL SUPER HEROES VS STREET FIGHTER
The second entry was the first to include Marvel heroes other than the X-men.



1998 MARVEL VS CAPCOM: NEW AGE OF HEROES
The third in the series, and the first to use Capcom characters from outside SF.



2000 MARVEL VS CAPCOM 2
Regarded as the greatest tag fighter of all time, *Marvel vs Capcom 2* was the first in the series to introduce 3v3 play.



2011 ULTIMATE MARVEL VS CAPCOM 3
A revision of *MvC3* released the same year, *UMvC3* enjoyed strong sales.

re-does the effects. It's also a balance update. Functionally, it's like the standalone 'Ultimate' version *Marvel vs Capcom 3* got, just... more. Dood himself is rather humble about it when showing off the mod in a video that highlights the first three months of development progress.

"I'm just a big *Marvel vs Capcom* fan," Dood says, introducing himself and the mod to people who might not know who either are. "I effectively started this with [modder] Ryn, who created an editor that allowed us to make these changes, and then we turned into a dev team of 20-plus people."

Dood is no stranger to drawing attention to *Marvel vs Capcom* as a series, launching the #FreeMvC2 hashtag to try to get *Marvel vs Capcom 2* ported to modern hardware. That campaign was reliant on Capcom doing something, and may have helped spur the *Marvel vs Capcom* collection that will release later this year. But this time, he and his team are doing the work themselves. In addition to spearheading the mod's development, Dood is also serving as the project's art director, moulding the new visual style and approving every change – and there are a lot of them.

"The whole point was to get us back to a colour scheme and feel of *Marvel vs Capcom 1*, as well as *Marvel Super Heroes vs Street Fighter*," Dood says when describing what he and the team are shooting for. "Every single piece of every single character is hand-crafted to look the way that it does."

That means characters like Ryu and Chun-Li look younger. Character palettes are brighter. Visual effects

harken back to earlier *Marvel* games. And everything, from the main menu to the character portraits to the music cues, is being reworked to capture The Vibe™ of the earlier games. The balance changes, like making characters linger longer on screen after tagging out during a super or buffing Captain Marvel's Binary Ignition super to make it more viable, are designed to make *Infinite & Beyond* last. "The budget of this project already at three months has well passed five figures,"

Dood says in the YouTube video showing off the mod's progress. "It's one of the most expensive things I've ever done."

DOOD HAD TO CLARIFY, SEVERAL TIMES, THAT IT WAS JUST A MOD

SECOND CHANCES

It's not rare to see a dedicated modding team come together to try to fix a game they love. It is rare, however, for a prominent streamer to put his own time, money and effort into resurrecting a game that everyone

has written off. But that's what's happening here, and the fighting game community seems ecstatic. The work on *Infinite & Beyond* is so impressive that Dood had to clarify, several times during the stream showing it off, that it was just a mod, not a new game. The whole thing is even more difficult to believe when you realise that Dood and co don't have *Infinite*'s source code. They're learning – and reengineering stuff – as they go.

Sometimes the stars align and a game gets another shot at life. *Marvel vs Capcom: Infinite & Beyond* already looks like it spent the last half decade training on top of a mountain. With any luck, it'll be ready for the runback. ■
Will Borger

EMOTION CONTROLS

Until Then director **MICKOLE KLEIN NULUD** on creating characters that the player cares for

During the early stages of the Covid pandemic, Mickole Klein Nulud was spending a lot more time at home than usual, due to lockdowns. He was watching a lot of entertainment, and that sparked something inside him. “[After watching] some of those media, I got really inspired. They reached into my heart.”

“What we did, was take inspiration from the people we knew growing up,” Nulud explains, “especially in school. I guess that’s how we made them feel real. It’s not just the characters, actually, it’s almost everything in the game. Getting things from our experiences growing up here in the Philippines.”

Using something old and real to create something new and fictional is clearly an effective method; at least when it comes to creating characters who resonate with the audience. “I’ve been seeing some comments saying, I wish I had a friend group like this,” says Nulud. “I wish I had a friend who cared for me like Cathy!” The writing works in sync with the art, which brings the cast even further to life with subtle expressions and character-specific animations. “Beyond the prompts that me and other writers had, [the artists] brought life to them in ways I didn’t expect.”

Until Then’s story has a supernatural element that eventually comes into play, but there are also strong elements of realism. In fact, it’s a desire to reflect the realities of the world – both good and bad – that lends the game its emotional strength. If you want to make

somebody care about a character on a screen, you need to make it feasible for them to exist in the same world as you.

JUMP CARE

“I think it’s not in the characters themselves individually,” explains Nulud, “but the web of these characters, how they interact with each other, their relationships. I care more about the relationships, their interactions, than the individual characters. That’s not to say that I don’t care at all about the characters themselves. I still have to go through their attributes before I start writing,

what they’ve been through, how they’re feeling right now; but what they’re thinking relative to other characters, their interactions... at least for me as a writer, that’s what I look at first.”

The sense of community and friendship seeps from the game, into development, and back again. “The story that the players are seeing right now, it’s not exactly how it was supposed to turn out initially. Four years ago I was 19, 20, and I didn’t have good writing sensibilities. The way we do writing is, we never just keep it in the writer’s room. Every time we have a new draft, we always present it to the team and ask for their feedback. So it’s a very dynamic process. Every script goes through the team, and that’s essentially what shaped it over the years and made it much better than what I initially wrote.”

There are a lot of laughs in *Until Then* – and also, a lot of heartache. There are some truly tragic moments when your emotional investment has a devastatingly powerful return. It’s all part of that realism that enhances the characterisation. “There have to be trade-offs in life,” says Nulud. “You don’t get everything you want, so you’re inevitably going to be upset, you know? You can see it in every ending. [Players] consider the first ending as the ‘bad’ ending, I guess, and then the second one *worse*, and the third one is the ‘true’ ending. But notice that none of them they call *good*, because there are trade-offs. That’s what we want to portray. There are trade-offs in life. You won’t get everything that you want; accept it.” ■

Luke Kemp

THE CRYING GAMES

I’m not crying, you’re... OK, I am



LIFE IS STRANGE

Nine years after Dontnod’s adventure, I’m still not quite over that devastating ending (you know which one). What a ride.



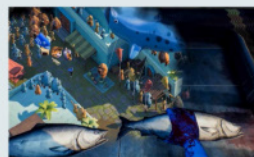
TO THE MOON

This game won’t tug your heartstrings, so much as play a deeply complex and unerringly affecting concerto on them.



A SPACE FOR THE UNBOUND

Another indie with luscious pixel art and beautiful, sorrowful storytelling that will stay with you for a long time.

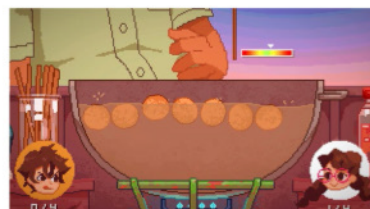
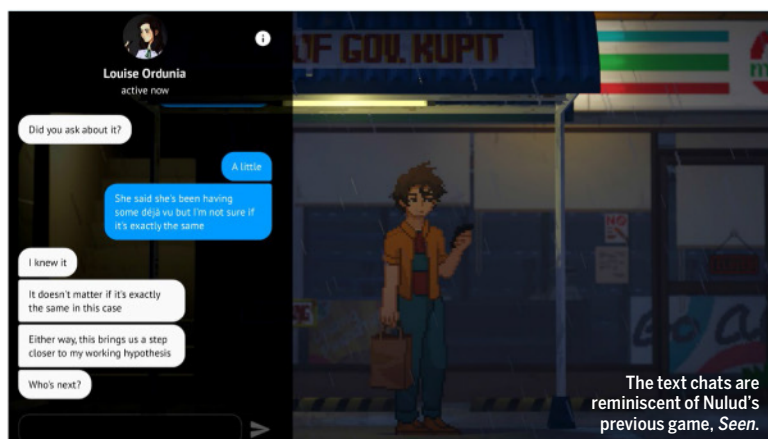


WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

Essentially a collection of wildly inventive and beautifully told short stories, at least one of which will surely Get You.

"I CARE MORE ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIPS THAN THE INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERS"

CAN YOU BELIEVE HOW FAR WE'VE COME?



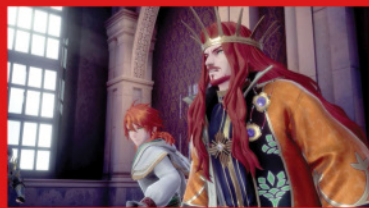
ABOVE: Enjoy the bike ride in the sun while you can, kids. Trust me.

LEFT: Mark and Cathy, best of friends. Oh my sweet ones, if only you knew.



Made in Japan

PC GAMING FROM THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN



ABOVE: Players will need to fight the game's big bads over multiple generations in order to finally defeat them.

BELOW LEFT: This guy just realised his local store has sold out of PC Gamer magazines.

A NEW GEN OF JRPG

The inside scoop on the much-anticipated **ROMANCING SAGA 2: REVENGE OF THE SEVEN**

After the positive reception of its recent remasters, Square Enix has greenlit a series of other remakes of classic games in its catalogue, with *Romancing SaGa 2: Revenge of the Seven* one of the most anticipated.

Reworking the original game, which came out back in 1993, the remake is delivering an evolved take on the classic JRPG, with a fully 3D world now on offer along with a brand-new co-op mode, enhanced battle system, and a series of new difficulty settings. There's also a very nice physical special edition of the game (see boxout) available exclusively through the Japanese Square Enix E-Store.

To get the inside scoop on the *Romancing SaGa 2: Revenge of the Seven* remake, PC Gamer spoke directly to the game's producer, Shinichi Tatsuke, about bringing it to life.

What has been the toughest aspect of remaking the game?

Since the original was released in 1993, it had a lot of elements that would be considered unkind to players by modern standards. For instance, the original featured enemy weaknesses, but they weren't visualised in any way. So our approach has been to consider each one of these cryptic elements and to revise them. Also, I know that there are people who think that the *SaGa* games are really difficult, but we wanted this game to be enjoyed by as many players as possible, so we made the rules for things like combat easier to understand, and we also took the effort to add some easier difficulty modes.

What is the *SaGa* series' unique gameplay hook?

That would have to be the Inheritance system. In most RPGs you have a single protagonist, and you play through only a small portion of their life. But the Seven Heroes, who serve



DR MARCO ZANGIROLAMI

Marco is an expert on the Japanese gaming industry, having reported on both the PC and home console market, as well as the arcade sector, since 1996. Not many people know this, but he's also a professional sunglasses wearer, looking good in them no matter the weather or the outfit he's wearing.

as the overarching villains in *Romancing SaGa 2*, are exceptionally powerful, meaning that they can't be defeated in a single generation. Because of this, the first Emperor, Leon, passes his title, experience and abilities on to his son, Gerard, and then subsequently to many more generations after that. This is an RPG that allows players to experience

"PLAYERS ARE FREE TO CHOOSE IN WHAT ORDER THEY DEFEAT THE SEVEN HEROES"

an epic tale that goes beyond the lifetime of an individual, and instead spans many thousands of years.

How does the remake rework the original game's combat and character growth mechanics?

The turn-based battles of the original game have been revised into a timeline-based system, similar to the one used for *Octopath Traveler*. Also, exploiting enemy weaknesses charges

up the Overdrive gauge. Once the gauge is full, the party can unleash a United Attack. The growth system features a new ability mechanic. Each class has its own set of associated abilities that can be learnt after a certain number of victories in battle has been attained. And once a certain number of victories is reached after this point, those abilities can be learnt by other characters as well.

Can you explain the non-linear structure of this RPG?

The system used in *Romancing SaGa 2* is called the "free-form scenario system", and it means that players are free to choose in what order they defeat the Seven Heroes, and how or where they extend the reach of their empire. There are also certain decisions to be made in each region of the game that will decide the flow of fate, so the way the story develops will change according to these.

Romancing SaGa 2: Revenge of the Seven is out on October 24, and it will be released on PC through Steam. A demo is available to download and play now. shorturl.at/5fxd6

JRP-GET IN MY TROLLEY

A closer look at the game's impressive special edition



Square Enix has gone all-out in creating *RS2*'s special edition. It costs ¥22,000 (approx £110/ \$140) and includes the game along with its original soundtrack, a 128-page game guide, a 17cm tall figure of female character Rocabouquet (one of the game's titular seven heroes), and a limited edition case with artwork from famous Japanese illustrator Tomomi Kobayashi.

shorturl.at/13Kw3

PREVIEW



Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2024DEVELOPER
Konami, VirtuousPUBLISHER
KonamiLINK
www.konami.com/mg/mgs3rMETAL GEAR
SOLID DELTA:
SNAKE EATERA fanatically faithful remake
of a bona fide classic

Metal Gear Solid Delta is Metal Gear Solid 3. “What a revelation,” you’re thinking, “I can’t believe this remake is a lot like the game it’s remaking”.

But no, really, listen to me. *Delta* isn’t *MGS3* the way that the *Silent Hill 2* remake is *Silent Hill 2* (see p26). Having spent an hour and a half with it, I can say this thing is a shot-for-shot, not-a-hair-out-of-place recreation of the original PS2 masterpiece that I regard as one of the greatest videogames ever made. Konami seems to have taken zero liberties.

Close your eyes and imagine *MGS3* in scintillating Unreal Engine 5 and you’re 95% of the way to experiencing what I saw. Aside from a dusting of mechanics from *MGS5* and a couple of quality-of-life features, this is the game as it was in a sparkly new package. With Hideo Kojima long-since absconded from Konami and trust in the company in short supply, I think that’s exactly what fans are looking for, even if I might question the value of a remake that hews so single-mindedly to the original.

AND SCENE

My demo consisted of the entire Virtuous Mission – *MGS3*’s prologue that sets up the stakes of the story to come, introducing us to characters like Naked Snake, The Boss, Ocelot, and Volgin. It is – I’m going to have to find lots of different

ways to say this throughout this preview – exactly as you remember it.

Except, of course, that it all looks a lot nicer. Konami has taken advantage of the last two decades of technological progress to make *MGS Delta* look sharp as hell in Unreal Engine 5. The foliage is luscious; the jungle feels hot, looming and oppressive; and all those characters now have detailed faces and expressions to go along with their voice acting, which is taken directly from the original game – no re-recordings here.

There’s no denying it looks great. Konami and Virtuous have done an excellent job translating the feel of the original game to a slick modern package, so much so that I didn’t even miss the yellow-y piss filter that was a trademark of OG *MGS3* (and which Konami says will be an option in the remake’s full release).

There was something a little odd about hearing those voices come from characters so exhaustively detailed, though. To be honest, it could just be that I’m much too used to the original game, but I felt something of an uncanny valley effect from hearing David Hayter and Josh Keaton’s over-the-top, anime-style voice acting come from models that otherwise looked so naturalistic and human. It’s a very minor quail with what was otherwise an impressive polish job, though, and I suspect I’d settle into it over the course of full playthrough.

PLAYED
IT

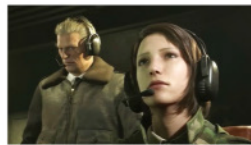
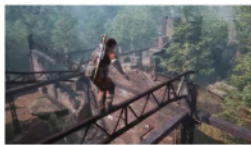
WHAT A THRILL

The outline of the Virtuous Mission is, say it with me, just as you remember it: Snake’s dispatched to sneak through the jungle and secure a defecting Soviet scientist. He’s undertaking the “world’s first HALO jump” to do it. Some guy on the plane calls him a “pantywaist” in a turn of phrase no human has used before or since, and so on. Even the R1-prompts, those opportunities to switch perspective mid-cutscene to see what Snake is looking at, are all where they were on the PS2.

After about 15 minutes of cutscenes and codec calls (oh yes, this is still *Metal Gear*), I was in. Snake’s gear is caught on a tree and I had to movement-tutorial my way over to it. The area, like every environment, is a recreation of the original.

Konami hasn’t transitioned *MGS Delta* to an *MGS5*-style open world. I was still

**ASIDE FROM A COUPLE OF
QUALITY-OF-LIFE FEATURES,
THIS IS THE GAME AS IT WAS**

Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater

➤ moving between areas separated by loading screens. Items like the SVD Sniper, XM16E1 assault rifle, and M37 shotgun were exactly where I remembered them, as were the enemies and their patrol routes. The only difference I could identify was the addition of a new collectible alongside the original game's kerotan frogs: little orange GA-KO ducks I could shoot to, presumably, unlock items later on down the line.

It does make me wonder what a version of *Delta* that took more creative liberties would look like. You'll think I'm mad, probably justifiably. After all, do I really trust modern-day, Kojima-less Konami to do something interesting and new with the classic? Not really, but the fact is that I have *MGS3* sitting on my SSD right now, easy to access and ready to play. It's not a perfect version – though Konami seems relatively dedicated to fixing it up – but it's still an excellent game. Do I really need a dolled-up but otherwise almost identical version? I do not, though I'm certain it's what most people who aren't me want.

Besides, parts of my demo were a joy even if they were very familiar. That *Metal Gear* sense of playful experimentation is intact. You can still hold enemies up and – by the magic of pointing your weapon at their head or their junk – force them to do a little dance that produces loot, and you can still drop hornets on foes' heads or deploy tranquillised jungle creatures in combat. Only my attempt to cause a time paradox by killing an unconscious Revolver Ocelot failed, but I'm almost certain that was just a limitation of the build I was playing.

KUWABARA, KUWABARA

So it's still the *Metal Gear* you love in play, but it's also in gameplay where the remake's slight mechanical differences from its ancestor make themselves known. Despite not using the FOX Engine, it's all a bit more *MGS5*. Snake can crouch-walk now, rather than having to shift fully between belly-crawling and sprinting around, and I could aim over Snake's shoulder with the left trigger rather than being forced to use iron sights to get off more precise shots.

MY ATTEMPT TO CAUSE A TIME PARADOX BY KILLING REVOLVER OCELOT FAILED

It's certainly smoother to play than the PS2 game. I never found myself having to contort my hand into bizarre shapes, as I did in the older games, to stand on my tippy-toes while aiming down the sights, nor did I ever get my close-quarters combat buttons mixed up and accidentally slit a hostage's throat like I did in days of yore. The game now helpfully flashes up prompts to tell you which buttons are interrogate, knock out, and kill when you grab a bad guy from behind.

Other systems, like the survival viewer, are – hang on, let me get out the thesaurus – analogous and parallel to their appearance in the original game. The same. They're the same. You still have to decide which weapons and items go in your quick-select and which stay in your backpack (and the more you have easily available, the quicker your stamina goes down), and you can still pop into the camouflage section to change your clothing and face paint to blend in.

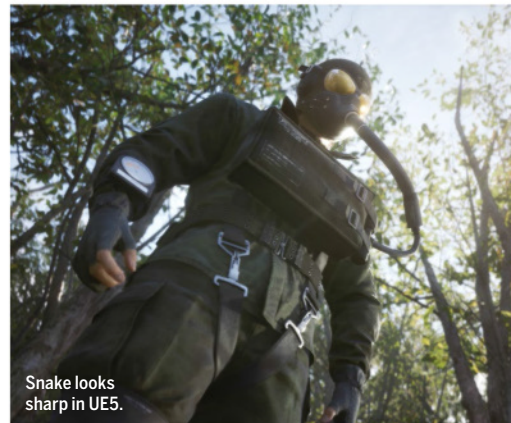
The only difference I could spot was the addition of a couple of quality-of-life features. You can now hold up on the D-pad to quickly flick between a list of camo/face paint presets, or hold a different button to get quick-access to codec frequencies, and you can equip a compass in the left item menu to function as a quest marker, pointing you where to go to progress the story. The only bit of the survival viewer I didn't have access to was the injury/cure system, but I'd be surprised if it was markedly different from the PS2 era.

YOU'RE PRETTY GOOD

So I think *Metal Gear Solid Delta* is shaping up to be exactly what fans want from it: A ludicrously faithful retelling of one of the greatest games of all time, with all the latest graphical bells and whistles and only the lightest of touches to make it feel a bit more playable for the Zoomers and Gen Alphas out there, who might balk at the zanier elements of the classic control scheme.

Of course, I've never really gotten the point of remakes like that. With *Cool Original MGS3* now playable on PC and Konami slowly tinkering away at it to make it an actually decent port, I'm perfectly happy to play that, but I won't pretend most fans don't want a glitzy, accurate, and skilful re-do of their old favourite. If what I saw of *Delta* is anything to go by, that's exactly what we're getting. Way to go, Snake. Age hasn't slowed you down.

Joshua Wolens



Sneak looks sharp in UE5.



ABOVE: It is a little weird to hear Snake's voice come out of such a realistic person.

LEFT: Sometimes you just have to go loud.

PREVIEW

STALKER 2: Heart of Chornobyl

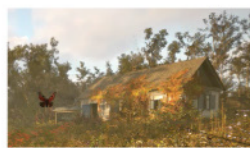


ABOVE: Little dashes of personalised art help bring the ruins of Chornobyl to life.

RIGHT: I'm sure it's perfectly safe to be here.



STALKER 2: Heart of Chornobyl



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

November 20, 2024

DEVELOPER

GSC Game World

PUBLISHER

GSC Game World

LINK

stalker2.com

STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

A gorgeous reimagining of the first game's atmosphere

I am, unfortunately, a bit of a hypocrite when it comes to videogames – especially ones like *STALKER*. In my heart, I know that atmosphere has precious little to do with graphical fidelity, that a skilled artist can make a deeply immersive game with naught but a few pixels, some shillings, cardboard, and elbow grease.

But there's a reason I've never properly sunk my teeth into *STALKER: Shadow of Chornobyl* despite all the praise it's gotten – and I have to admit it has quite a lot to do with presentation. The game never looked bad for its time, and its immersive atmosphere is rightfully lauded – but its visuals have had a short half life. It was developed in the X-Ray engine, but it gives off a Source engine smell that's impossible to disconnect from my misspent youth in *Garry's Mod*.

This is a personal failing. However, after sitting down and playing a hands-on demo of the new game at Gamescom, I'm happy to report that developer GSC Game World has excelled in the areas it was already strong at, and is on its way to creating a game that rivals the first's legendary texture with all the new modern toys in the studio's toolbox.

The short session I enjoyed followed Skif, a downright surly fellow, returning to the zone with an artefact and a thirst for answers. As uninitiated to the franchise as I am, the finer details blissfully drifted past my head as I was promptly (and appropriately) shoved through a dank,

pitch-black sewer that taught me the basics of movement before being given a direction, a set of wide-open fields with abandoned farmhouses in them, and several locations to scan.

HANDMADE

In an interview I'd later do with the studio's technical producer Evgeniy Kulik, I'm reassured that "all locations you may notice in the game, from the big ones to the smallest villages, are made all by hand" – and I can feel it here. Bodies are often slumped over by lived-in vignettes, collections of items designed to try and make this localised apocalypse homely.

What went through my mind, however, was an appreciation for just how far the studio itself has come in the 16 years since the first game. Not just in terms of its harrowing real-life struggles – test builds being leaked, an active war and a new office away from said war suffering a fire – but in terms of what I am seeing, hearing, and feeling as I slink nervously through the underbrush.

Comparing notes to PC Gamer's own Phil Savage, who played a demo at last year's Gamescom, I get the sense I've had a far more relaxed experience. That's either because I played like a complete scaredy-cat, or because GSC Game World is, by this point, expertly proficient at building up and releasing tension.

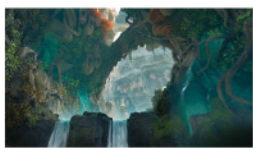
In one segment, I arrive to establish contact with a bunker only to find out everyone inside has been killed – I slink around corners, cautiously search for a laptop and await whatever butchered everyone to jump out at me – perhaps, if I'm lucky, with an 'ooga booga'. *STALKER 2* resists this urge, however, and it just made me even more nervous. This is a trick I imagine the full game's going to use with cruel efficiency: after all, the monsters you can't see are the most frightening. The modernisation of *STALKER 2* might be the thing that gets me on board with the series, motivating me to go back and give the first games a proper try. If I can survive a one-on-one duel with a rusty assault rifle against a mutant with in-built cloaking technology, I can probably handle the original recipe (he wrote, with immeasurable hubris).

Harvey Randall

PLAYED IT

"ALL LOCATIONS YOU MAY NOTICE IN THE GAME ... ARE MADE ALL BY HAND"

The sun sets on the exclusion zone.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Feb 18, 2025

DEVELOPER
Obsidian Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

LINK
avowed.obsidian.net

AVOWED

It's the differences that make Obsidian's latest so interesting

The *Skyrim*-ness of *Avowed* has been much debated – Obsidian repeatedly downplaying the comparison, carefully setting expectations around its size and scope. Here's the thing, though. Having now played through a dungeon-sized encounter, there is a comforting familiarity to *Avowed*'s moment-to-moment exploration.

Avowed is a first-person fantasy RPG. I'm wandering around with a companion in tow, dual-wielding weapons, crouching in the darkness in order to sneak up on my enemies. The comparison to *Skyrim* is as obvious as it is inevitable, and as much as Obsidian seems to want to downplay it, I don't think the studio needs to. The familiarity is a boon that accentuates the interesting things *Avowed* is doing that make it stand out. And while I only played for about an hour, I'm convinced. I want to see more.

My job is to find a missing expedition team. Instead I discover a gold guy – Sargamis – who's just hanging out, tending to the statue he's built of the god Eothas. He *definitely* hasn't seen any expedition, oh no, *nobody* has passed through here. But while we're looking for them, he asks that me and Kai, my companion, wade deeper into some ruins to retrieve a splinter of Eothas – a relic that just so happens to be exactly what the expedition was looking for. "Perhaps you will meet your expedition along the way," he suggests, somehow managing not to wink at the camera.

HE'S RIPPED OUT THEIR SOULS AND INTENDS TO STUFF THEM INTO HIS SPECIAL GOD STATUE

SKILL ISSUE

My trek to the splinter requires getting a grip on combat. There are no locked classes in *Avowed* – you can mix and match between skills of different types – but the character I picked had been pre-equipped with a bunch of perks from the Ranger tree. In addition to the bows and pistols I was carrying, I had a couple of neat skills designed to make the most of ranged combat. Tanglefoot placed vines underneath an enemy's feet, rooting them in place for a time. And Shadowing Beyond let me turn invisible, repositioning around the battlefield and letting me unleash a powerful backstab that seemed to instantly kill most of the enemies.

Combat was chaotically frantic, even with these tools. Using Kai as a de facto tank, I still found myself in a couple of tight spots, mostly thanks to ranged enemies and their ability to stagger me mid-potion quaff – disrupting my ability to heal. There's a satisfying loop to *Avowed*'s ranged combat, but the PC gaming snob in me does wonder about how much depth there will be in the skill system. Combat feels engineered to be comfortable on a gamepad – which is what the Gamescom demo was set up for. The ability to mix up different skills from different combat types should lead to some nice experimentation, but it's hard not to look at the UI and wonder about how streamlined and efficient it all feels.

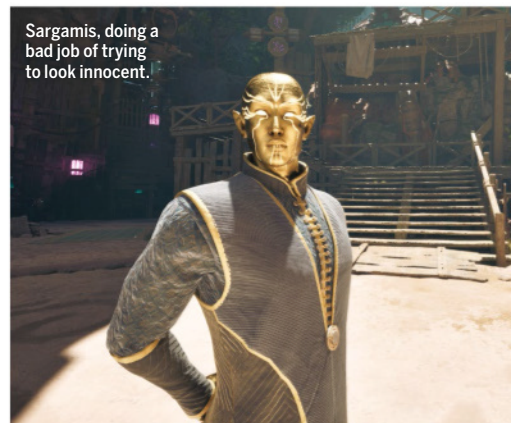
Eventually I find the expedition, and surprise, they're all dead. Or at least sort-of dead. Returning to Sargamis, he admits that he's ripped out their souls and intends to stuff them into his special god statue. His plan is to use the splinter to draw Eothas into his creation, where the souls of the expedition team will act as his conscience – forcing the god to atone for the wrong he has done. Which is a neat concept for what could have easily been a fairly bog-standard dungeon dive.

Since playing the demo, a handful of colleagues have asked me about *Avowed*, and for the most part I've told them, "It's a bit like *Skyrim*". And as true as that is, it's also just the easiest answer, because hopefully – if this play session is representative of the full game – it's also the least interesting thing about *Avowed*.

Phil Savage



Sargamis, doing a bad job of trying to look innocent.



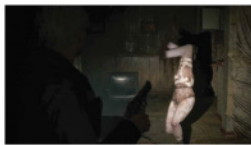


ABOVE: It's more vibrant than your average *Skyrim* cave.

LEFT: Kai tussles with a giant beetle.



Silent Hill 2 Remake



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 8, 2024

DEVELOPER
Bloober Team

PUBLISHER
Konami

LINK
www.konami.com

SILENT HILL 2 REMAKE

Whisper it, but Bloober might have pulled this off.

I get the impression that Bloober Team knows what you think of it. Since the studio was announced as the force behind the remake of the beloved *Silent Hill 2*, it feels like the game's fanbase has been sucking air through its teeth, waiting to see how badly Bloober messed up.

I don't think it has. Having spent three hours with the game, it's not perfect, but I didn't come away thinking the devs behind *Layers of Fear* and *The Medium* have massacred a classic. Instead, I think they've been inclined to play things safe, turning out a UE5 embellishment of the original that feels a lot like *Silent Hill 2* filtered through the design ideas of the *Resident Evil* remake.

For die-hards and purists (terms I don't use pejoratively; I'm a die-hard and purist about plenty of stuff), that shift will likely be too much by itself. But if you're just *Silent Hill*-curious, or someone with vague memories of the now 23-year-old original game who'd like to return to that town? I think Bloober might have actually pulled it off.

LEON SUNDERLAND

It does feel a lot like that *RE2* remake though, in terms of how it plays. The three hours I spent with *Silent Hill 2* took me from its opening – James Sunderland getting his head together in the roadside toilet we all know and love – through the streets of Silent Hill and into the Wood Side and Blue Creek apartments. If I'd

squinted I could have convinced myself I was playing Capcom's 2019 banger using some kind of greyscale ENB preset.

Bloober has dispensed with the fixed camera angles and tank controls of the original game and given us something all about shaky over-the-shoulder aiming and rotating objects you pick up in the world. A transition from *Resident Evil* (old) to *Resident Evil* (new) in gameplay.

If you're not wedded to those fixed camera angles, it works. The pitch-black and creaky flats of the Wood Side apartments didn't feel any less tense and fearful just because I was looking at them from over James' shoulder and not from a viewpoint placed somewhere in the corner of the room, and I suspect the angle will be a lot more palatable to a disturbingly adult-aged population of players who didn't grow up with games that refused to let you control the camera.

Besides, not everything feels new. You'll still have to solve somewhat obtuse puzzles to progress at times, just like in the good old days. That's baffling in a "why would a human design this?" sense, mind you, not difficulty. On normal puzzle

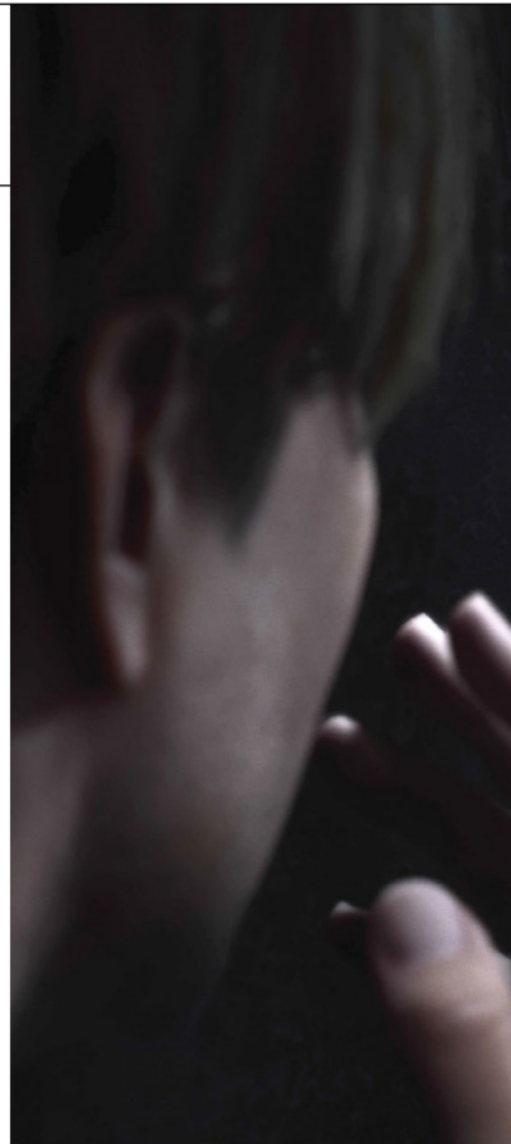
difficulty (you can choose separate difficulties for combat and puzzles, just like the old game), I had little trouble getting through puzzles old and new: things like fixing the Neely's

Bar jukebox, solving an expanded version of the coin puzzle, and figuring out the code to a safe by pointing my torch at spots on the wall.

SURVIVAL MODE

I'm glad those puzzles are there, because they gave me a break from what's probably my biggest gripe with the whole experience: the combat. Just like the *RE2* remake, *Silent Hill 2* makes gunplay a high-risk, high-reward proposition. Hit your enemies and they go down relatively quickly, but miss and you're wasting your very limited supplies of ammo.

But where the *RE2* remake's zombie foes were good cannon fodder – they were slow and shambling, which kind of made up for the fact that Leon had a tendency to sway as he aimed – *Silent Hill 2*'s don't feel suited to shooting. They can be fast, particularly the Mannequins, and that makes for a frustrating combo when James' aim wobbles and wobbles like



PLAYED
IT



Impossible to tell who it is from behind.

HIT YOUR ENEMIES AND THEY GO DOWN QUICKLY, BUT MISS AND YOU'RE WASTING AMMO



ABOVE: Bloober has altered James' remake appearance a little in response to feedback.

LEFT: No running, no bombing, no petting.

PREVIEW

Silent Hill 2 Remake

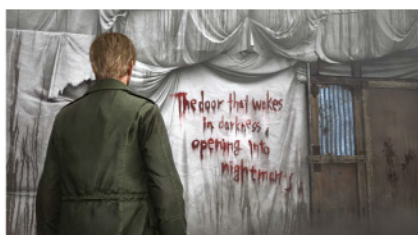
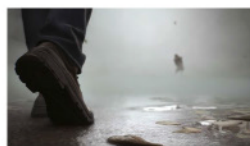
RIGHT: The map updates as you move around town.

BELOW: Taking Pyramid Head on with your club is not recommended.



Silent Hill 2 Remake

The most iconic public bathroom in gaming.



8 | 10

🔊 psychosexual jelly. Fighting is plentiful, too, which gives you a lot of time to pick away at its flaws.

To be clear, Bloober hasn't turned *Silent Hill* into a character action game or anything. There's still lots of room for the atmosphere to breathe and seep into you, and encountering foes on the streets isn't so much of an issue given that you can just run around them, but a lot of my time in the apartments – which were cavernous – was taken up by fights that often felt more frustrating than tense.

But combat in the original game was no picnic either. Maybe making it kind of a chore in the remake is just Bloober trying to be extra faithful. It's the atmosphere and narrative that makes up for it. The monsters might not be super-fun to fight, but they are truly horrifying, all squeaky and shiny and unnervingly sexual, and the sinister crackle from your radio that signals their approach never stopped being creepy and ominous to me. Iffy combat never stopped the original from becoming a classic, after all.

So despite some missteps, I think the attempt to modernise the game is a success. Sure, it feels a lot like *Silent Hill 2* in an *RE2* skin, but that remake was pretty excellent. There are far worse examples for Bloober to follow, and for the most part it's done well at wrapping the vibes of *SH2* in that modern package.

THAT BOY NEEDS THERAPY

Narratively, the remake is the *Silent Hill 2* of old: James receives a letter from his wife saying she's hanging out in Silent Hill. As an attentive husband, James is like 85% sure his wife died three years ago, so that's concerning to him. Off he goes on an adventure to figure out just what's going on, finding a town filled with monsters and a few kindred spirits who have also found themselves inexplicably drawn there.

In my time with the game, I met characters like Angela and Eddie, and they, too, are pretty much as they were 23 years ago. Their voices have changed, though. Bloober isn't reusing the voicework from the original game or the HD re-recordings, and the new direction definitely feels different to the way things

used to be. The PS2 version felt like it had a bit of a stage-acting thing going on: Characters tended to speak clearly and with great enunciation, maybe even getting a little hammy at times.

Not so in the remake. Here we have acting that sometimes dips into ASMR; James and co speak quietly, naturally, often muttering to themselves as they work through the tumult in their heads.

It feels more, well, modern. Acting you'd see in a movie or on prestige TV as opposed to the kind of thing you'd find in the bombastic annals of videogame history. I liked the performances, but if you view the acting in the original game as the crux of the whole weird experience, I can imagine being disappointed that Bloober didn't try to capture that essence.

Mostly, though, things seem to be staying as they were. Cutscenes like James' first meeting with Angela in the graveyard and his first encounter with Pyramid Head are very much as you remember them from 2001. There may have been actual unrest in the streets if Bloober had tried to change the game's story, so I'm pretty sure we can all rest easy that the studio – which has always been criticised for its narratives – seems to be taking a light touch.

Pretty sure. Like I said, I spent most of my time wandering around the Wood Side and Blue Creek apartments, so I wasn't exposed to much beyond the beginnings of *Silent Hill 2*'s plot. Could Bloober try to pull the narrative rug out from under us later on? Maybe, and boy I do not envy its email inbox if it does.

I SEE THAT TOWN

Fans have been rightly sceptical of Bloober's involvement in the *Silent Hill 2* remake, but I think the studio's instinct to stay mostly faithful has paid off. Despite being a long-time advocate for remakes getting weird with it and mixing things up, I don't think that attitude would have served Bloober well in this case. Let's be honest: To *Silent Hill 2* stalwarts, perfection brooks no improvement, and the studio's writing just wouldn't be up to the task of doing something interesting with the game anyway.

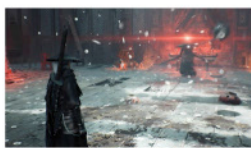
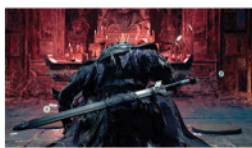
Yes, there are jettisoned aspects of the old game that will rub devotees the wrong way, and some things (the combat) that just don't quite feel great to me, but overall my time with the remake left me feeling that Bloober had taken an admirable stab at a nearly impossible task.

Joshua Wolens

AS AN ATTENTIVE HUSBAND, JAMES IS LIKE 85% SURE HIS WIFE DIED THREE YEARS AGO

PREVIEW

Phantom Blade Zero



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBD

DEVELOPER
S-Game

PUBLISHER
S-Game

LINK
pbz.s-game.com

PHANTOM BLADE ZERO

Less Sekiro, more
Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty

I got to sit down and play *Phantom Blade Zero* at Gamescom, and came away feeling quite impressed. Judging by the reactions of my fellow demo-ri-ers, one of who managed to beat it a whole seven minutes before me (I'm not upset), it's looking to be a sleeper hit.

Phantom Blade Zero comes from S-Game, and it's the studio's first major effort and, as PC Gamer's own Rich Stanton noted last year, it's also inspired by an RPG maker game the team made back in 2010 named *Rainblood: Town of Death*. S-Game has since been pretty eager to draw a line between *Phantom Blade Zero* and soulslikes – revealing that while it's certainly drawn inspiration, it's definitely its own thing.

Having got my mitts on it, I'm in full agreement. *Phantom Blade Zero* feels, in spirit, a lot more like Team Ninja's *Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty* – taking the trappings of FromSoftware's *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* and reinventing the genre into a wuxia action romp, like a hefty dash of *God Hand* or *Ninja Gaiden* thrown in the soulslike soup. It's a genre diversion that I'm gleeful – downright kicking my feet and giggling – to see flourish.

Phantom Blade Zero is a game that's not too concerned about rugged exploration filled with a billion threats. It's not entirely uninterested in it, mind, but enemies don't respawn after you've killed them once – there's no reason to have to

chew through the same adversaries over and over especially since, from what I've played, the focus is more on the boss fights.

FEEL THE FLOW

What separates it from *Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty*, however, is that it's not afraid to let things get complex. For starters, you have two types of attack that require either a perfect parry or a perfect spot dodge – that is, a dodge where you commit to the power of iframes and stay rooted as the swing comes in. You also have access to timed blocks, which are great for stance-breaking (Sha-Chi depleting) your foes.

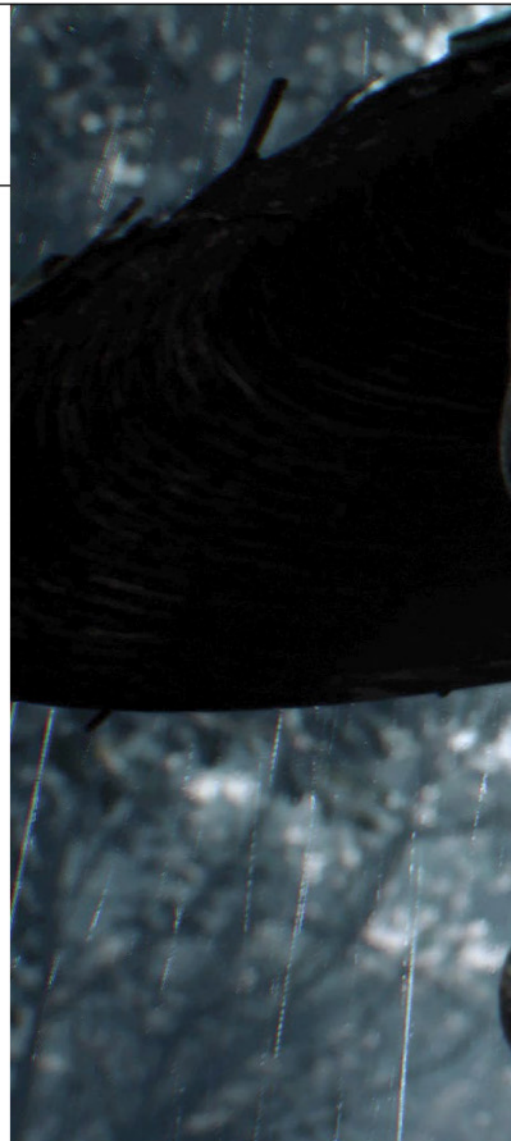
In the mix you've got ranged weapons – such as a bow and arrow or, more stylishly, a giant tiger head that spits fire – and special moves that are fuelled by Sha-Chi essence named Power Surges. You can use these to capitalise on the openings you create, and boy are you going to create them. You can stance-break an enemy in but a few flourishes of your chosen weapon if you play well.

It's all feeling very over-the-top in a delicious way, unshackled from the earthly need to be grounded and sensible. It, like *Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty*, trades out deliberate and careful movement for cool flips and tricks. Unlike that game, however, it gives its players both a wider toolbox and enemies that are more inclined to mix you up like you stumbled into EVO before learning how to dragon punch.

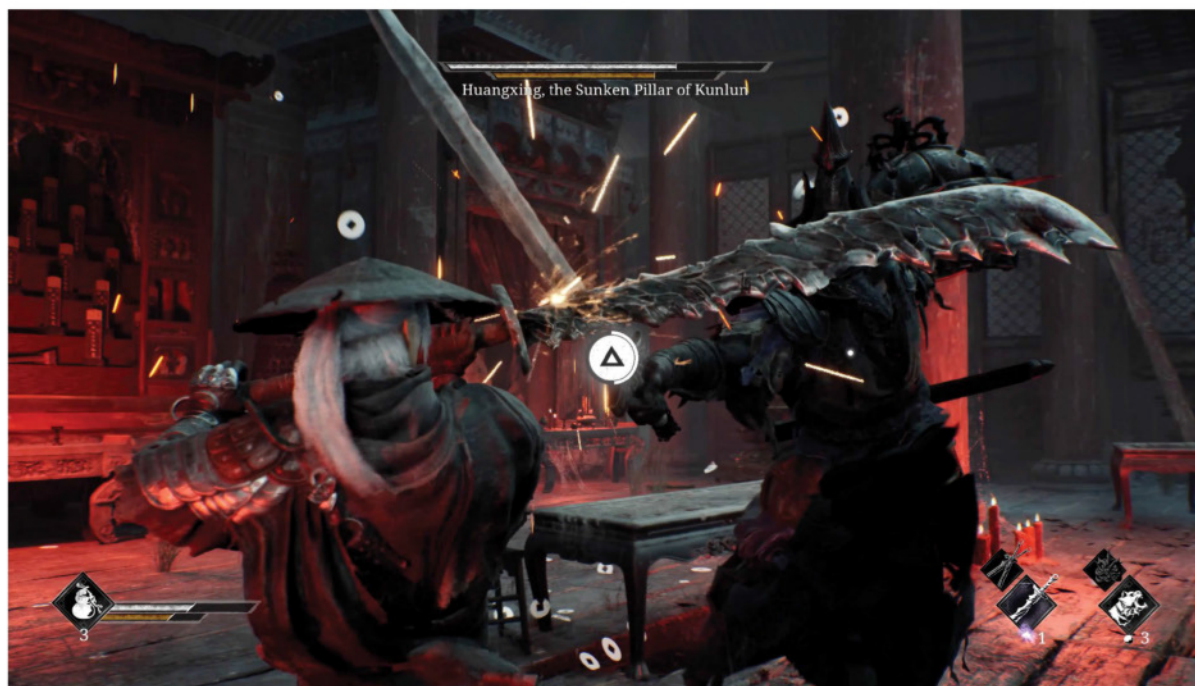
One of my favourites was a boss who threw a weighted chain at me – flashing a red light to tell me that the incoming attack needed to be perfect-dodged. However, said bad guy then proceeded to hurl his weapon upwards, forcing me to intuit (by the flex of his arm) when it was coming back down. Multiple times, though, I'd be further punished by a hitbox as he yanked the offending bludgeon away if my positioning was bad.

It's all a delicious baseline for skill expression, unafraid to assume its players are skilled enough to get spicy with its mechanics, and I cannot wait to play some more – my attention (formerly my interest) has now turned into full-blown excitement.

Harvey Randall



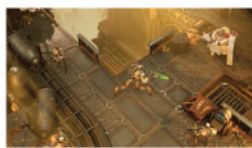
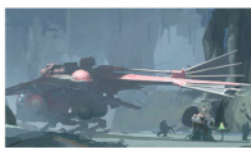
IT'S ALL VERY OVER-THE-TOP IN A DELICIOUS WAY, UNSHACKLED FROM THE NEED TO BE SENSIBLE



ABOVE: Tall, dark, handsome, and about to die a lot.

LEFT: Honestly, the sparing quick-time event is a nice breather.

Warhammer 40K: Mechanicus 2



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
Bulwark StudiosPUBLISHER
Kasedo GamesLINK
mechanicus40k.comWARHAMMER 40K:
MECHANICUS 2

Primed to bridge the gap between wargame vets and tactics fans

At the start of a short *Warhammer 40K: Mechanicus 2* preview I attended at Gamescom last week, I was a smidge concerned. I'm not a wargamer, I've never painted a miniature, and I only break out my tape measure when I need to put a shelf up. *Warhammer 40,000* has a bit of a reputation for being, well, complicated.

Despite my comfort with TTRPG systems, as I sat down to be exposed to the *Mechanicus* series for the first time proper, there was a part of my brain that was worried I'd be lost in the dark about this secretive and occult club with eldritch knowledge given only to those who routinely attend clandestine meetings of strategic masterminds.

I needn't have worried. Far from being lost, I was actually relieved to find myself picking up what the game was putting down quite quickly, even while watching a developer play it, thanks to a cleverly-refurbished mechanic that helped me read between the lines of code.

Mechanicus 2 follows two central campaigns – one shadowing the Necrons, robo-skeletons who have been napping for millions of years, and one for the Adeptus Mechanicus, a permitted cult within the human Imperium of Man that praises the machine god, with about as many mechanical augmentations stuffed into them as you'd expect. There are a few noted upgrades when compared to the first game, such as a wider range of environments, a cover system, and less

PLAYED
IT

obfuscated narrative events. I can't speak to the exact crunchiness of these improvements or how they slot into the whole, given the turn-based tactics genre requires time to steep and stew in my brain to get a proper critical opinion going rather than a swift, hands-off preview on a busy convention floor. There's only so much you can talk about a fresh coat of paint on a car before you get behind the wheel and get some miles in, yourself.

What did leap out to me, however, was its revamped Cognition system. Which, like the beauty of a simple machine, is both smart and straightforward enough to have grabbed my attention.

COGNITION IGNITION

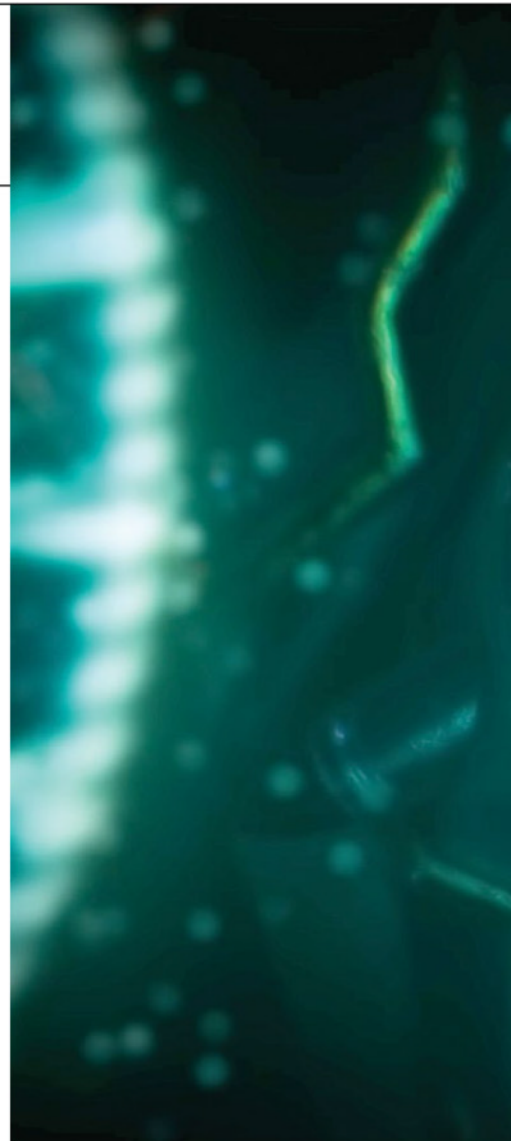
For context: Cognition was, in the first *Mechanicus* game, a resource which you would use to do things like fire certain weapons, trigger abilities, and extend your movement. Typically, this was gathered by interacting with map elements or sending your servo-skulls to collect intel.

In *Mechanicus 2*, however, every unit has a unique way of collecting this Cognition for your crew – for example, your Servitor units (beefy, mindless drones created by stuffing a bunch of tech into a meat puppet) give you Cognition whenever you use them to soak up damage. Other units give you Cognition by completing similar objectives, such as shooting enemies outside a minimum distance.

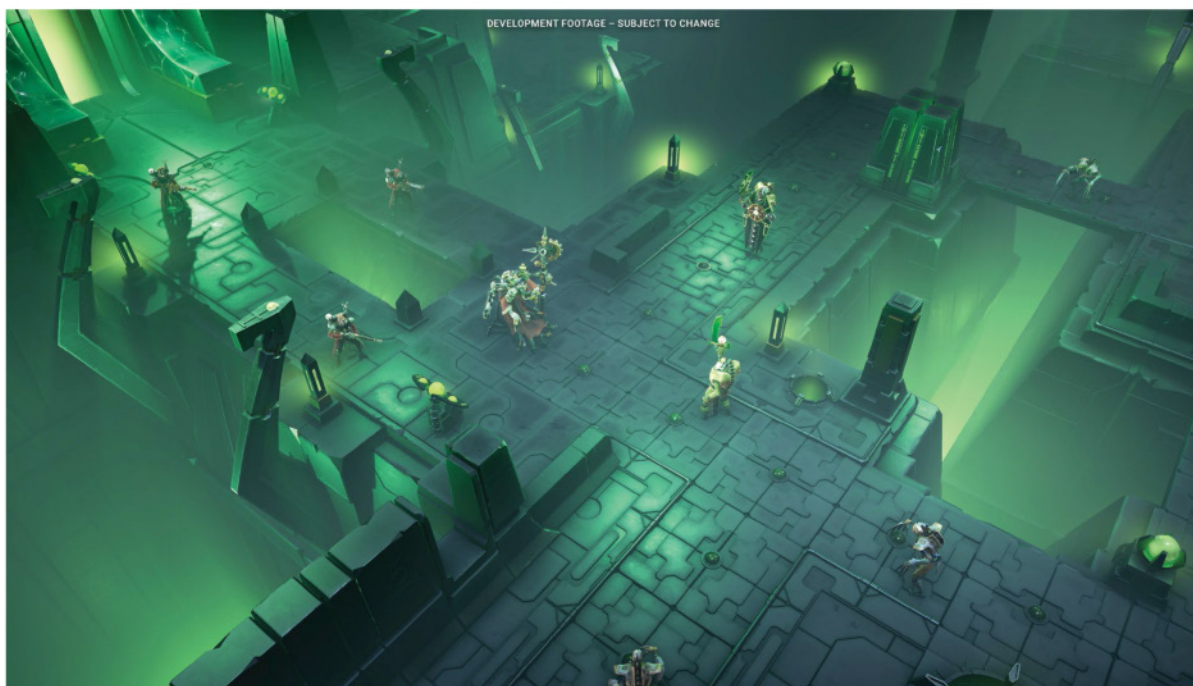
This is a brilliant bit of game design, because it helps to bridge the gap between those unfamiliar with the series (me, for shame) and *Warhammer 40K* vets who know each unit's general role like the back of their own cybernetic claw. It's essentially a mini-tutorial baked into every unit's core mechanics. The Necrons have access to a different mechanic, named Dominion, which produces different effects – but more-or-less achieves the same goal.

Despite a lack of knowledge that would have me tried, lobotomised and potentially turned into a Servitor, *Mechanicus 2* looks just as complex as its predecessor while also being far less intimidating for newcomers – which, much like the meeting of machine and flesh (praise the Omnissiah) is the best of both worlds.

Harvey Randall

EVERY UNIT HAS A UNIQUE
WAY OF COLLECTING THIS
COGNITION FOR YOUR CREW

I, too, want a little flying skull to carry a candle around for me.



ABOVE: That's a nightmare for cosplayers.

LEFT: The tombs from the first game are back, though mixed in with a few more environments.

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Joshua Wolens

Don't worry,
he'll get back up.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Far Out Games

PUBLISHER
Konami

LINK
deliveratallcosts.com

DELIVER AT ALL COSTS

Pure, destructive chaos is pure, destructive fun

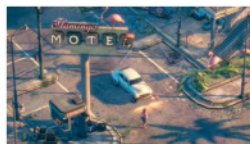
Talk about a surprise. When I signed up to attend a Konami preview event, it was almost entirely to get some time with the *Silent Hill 2* remake and *Metal Gear Solid Delta*. I knew nothing about the third game on the docket: chaotic, isometric delivery sim *Deliver At All Costs*.

PLAYED IT

By the time I left, *DAAC* was easily the game I was most excited about. No shade towards *MGS* or *SH2*, but my *Mercenaries*-loving self has felt a constant hunger for massive environmental destruction and physics-based ludicrousness for the last 19 years, and *DAAC* delivers both in spades.

SAME-DAY DELIVERY

Deliver At All Costs is a '50s pastiche that puts you in the underachieving shoes of Winston Green, a bona fide engineering genius whose short temper has kept him from ever fulfilling his potential. Down on



his luck and behind on rent, Winston takes a job with a local delivery company to make ends meet.

It starts with a quick drive over to the office. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and I'll be damned if I'm not a man of science. I angled Winston's rusty old beater towards my quest objective and hit the gas, ploughing through every park bench, lamp post, person, and building in my way.

DAAC's world is fantastically destructible. Nothing is an obstacle to a vehicle moving at high enough speeds, and that includes buildings, which can nearly all be smashed through or reduced to ruins. Meanwhile, the populace is so spongy that everyone can go flying after being hit by a truck travelling at 80mph

and barely feel a thing. My sojourn to the company office involved Kool-Aid Man'ing through about 16 different structures and, friends, it really never gets old.

Your tasks only escalate in lunacy. You start out ferrying around fireworks that keep setting themselves off and destroying the environment, then you have to cart around 80-or-so melons that are loose in the bed of your truck without too many of them physics-ing their way out onto the road. The last job I did involved transporting a machine that kept spitting out helium balloons, making my car lighter and lighter until every slight ramp sent me sailing across half the map like James and the Giant Peach.

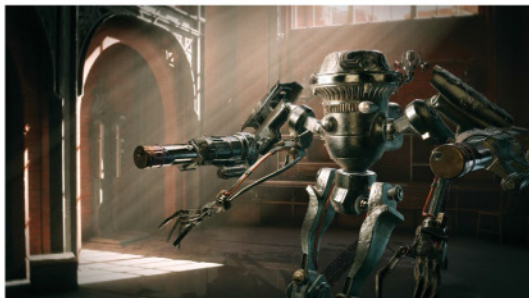
It's all silly and creative in an old-school, videogamey way. It's like the devs realised the only real limit to how ridiculous they could make things was their imagination and had full licence to go totally wild. As much as I truly enjoyed the cinematic, highfalutin' experiences offered by *MGSD* and *SH2*, there is something tremendously and simply entertaining about what *DAAC* has to offer.

Joshua Wolens

NOTHING IS AN OBSTACLE TO A VEHICLE MOVING AT HIGH ENOUGH SPEEDS



PCG's bet? Stealth *Firewatch* sequel.



MYSTERY NEW GAME

WolfEye has a new
immersive sim cooking

Here's the good news: WolfEye – the *Weird West* studio from Arkane founder Raphael Colantonio – has a new immersive sim coming. Ready for the bad news?

That's about 85% of what we know about it. WolfEye is keeping its cards very close to its chest right

now, to the point that it's not even telling us the name.

Still, we have managed to wring some details out of the man himself. In a chat with PC Gamer, Colantonio said to imagine the game as being somewhere between 2017's *Prey* and *Fallout: New Vegas* in structure, but "still with the values of previous games we've worked on... its mobility and that kind of physicality, the level design, the world-building of those games, but served in a structure that is more open than ever."

Apart from that, we know it's an alt-history setting in "the early 1900s in America" where a "crazy technology from the future" has upset the apple cart.

FIRST
LOOK

A retro-future RPG from *Dishonored* vets? Sounds good to us. Now to wait impatiently for more.

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
WolfEye Studios

PUBLISHER
TBA

LINK
wolfeye-studios.com

You'll get a new
party member on
your journey, too.



FIRST
LOOK

PERSONA 3 RELOAD: EPISODE AIGIS

An exact remake of
the series' black sheep

RELEASE
September 10, 2024

DEVELOPER
Atlus

PUBLISHER
Sega

LINK
p3re.jp/en/expansion

Atlus has remade *Persona 3's* Aigis-centric epilogue, which means a lot of *Persona 3 Reload's* combat and very little of its

social stuff. This was a bit controversial the first time it was released in 2007.

If you love the game's combat, or are just super invested in Aigis, then

there will be something here for you. But if the idea of slogging through a dungeon as Aigis doesn't tickle your fancy, you might want to hold off.

Commandos: Origins



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
Claymore Game StudiosPUBLISHER
Kalypso MediaLINK
s.team/a/1479730COMMANDOS:
ORIGINSTaking stealth tactics
back to boot camp

Establishing a genre is a hard act to follow. The *Commandos* series defined what we now know as stealth-tactics; quicksave-heavy real-time stealthy puzzling behind enemy lines. While the original developer – Pyro Studios – is long-since defunct, a new studio – Claymore – has formed to revive the series, starting with a slick-looking prequel.

Claymore invited me to watch them showcasing a couple missions from the upcoming *Commandos: Origins*. It certainly looks the part. These are some very fetching WWII fortresses and encampments, filled with fine details and historical weapons, vehicles and architecture. If you're going to be slowly crawling through a location, it might as well be scenic.

Also new to *Origins* are seamless transitions between exterior and interior environments. Par for the course now in the genre, but the originals had interior investigations happen on separate maps. Now you can rotate and zoom the camera freely around a properly 3D environment, with the roofs and walls of buildings fading out as troops enter a structure. Expected in 2024, but a nice improvement. Stealth is also fairly forgiving here, with clear sight-cones, delayed enemy reactions (which get faster on higher difficulties), and several minor alarms allowed before the entire map goes on full alert.

Most of what I saw was a three-man mission from early in the game (the full six-man squad is saved for the final

stretch), a sneaky foray onto a Nazi-infested island with a mansion in the centre and several anti-air guns to be destroyed. While each mission has optional objectives (like collecting intel) that unlock additional lore, they're largely for bragging rights. The main objective did seem to be pleasantly non-linear, with several ways to sneak in and blow up the guns, or knock out the enemy radar and call in a bombing run. Hopefully indicative of the game's general mission structure.

THE POLISH OFFENSIVE

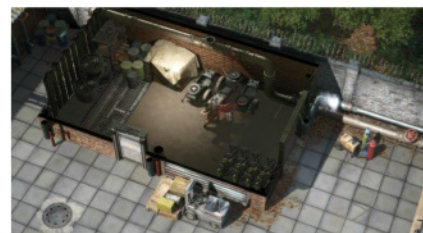
What most struck me about the game is how clean and familiar the UI looked. Nigh identical to *Shadow Gambit*, and entirely devoid of the grid-based inventory of *Commandos 3* or the bundle of gear crammed into the corner of the UI in the first game. All the fiddly-but-charming interface elements are replaced with clear pictograms and context-sensitive actions, designed to be equally friendly for mouse-and-keyboard or gamepad use.

Everything I've seen of the game so far looks and sounds like *Commandos*, but buffed to a mirror sheen. Gone is much of the grime and grit, which I feel might rob the game of some of its old-school WWII atmosphere.

At this point, my main concern for *Commandos: Origins* is that it's not bringing much new to the table. Aside from the returning ability to drive vehicles (and there are few better ways to 'go loud' than hijacking a tank), almost all the mechanics here seem very similar – if not functionally identical – to Mimimi's output over the past eight years. Claymore also confirmed that the campaign would be a largely linear (dirty) dozen or so missions, with no skill unlocks, character progression or side-questing.

That pared-down approach might make this a good place for newcomers to get on board, especially with the addition of online and split-screen multiplayer. *Commandos: Origins* looks to be a solid, polished and good-looking take on the genre, but with *Shadow Gambit* still fresh in the memory and competition this year already heated (see *Sumerian Six* and *Stargate: Timekeepers*), Claymore might have an uphill struggle ahead when *Commandos: Origins* deploys.

Dominic Tarason

FIRST
LOOK

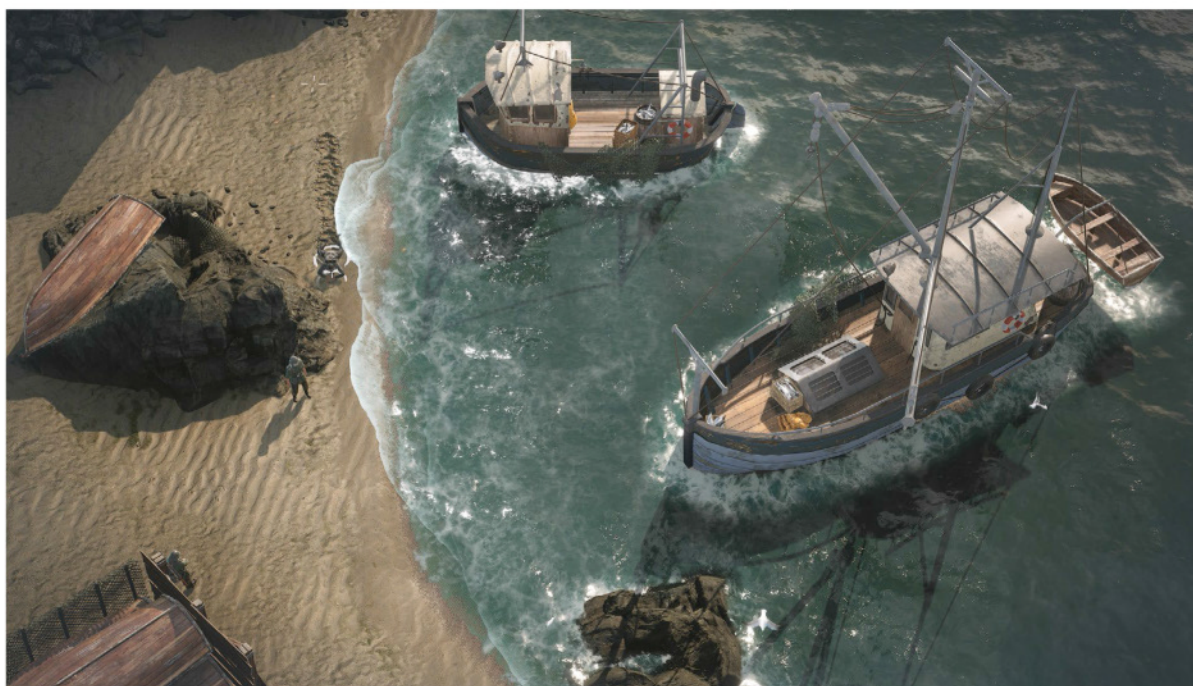
You were only supposed to blow the bloody doors off!

**FETCHING WWII FORTRESSES
FILLED WITH FINE DETAILS
AND HISTORIC WEAPONS**



ABOVE: There's some lovely detail and lighting on the African maps, with deep shadows to hide in.

LEFT: Moving around on sand leaves a very obvious trail that guards can spot.



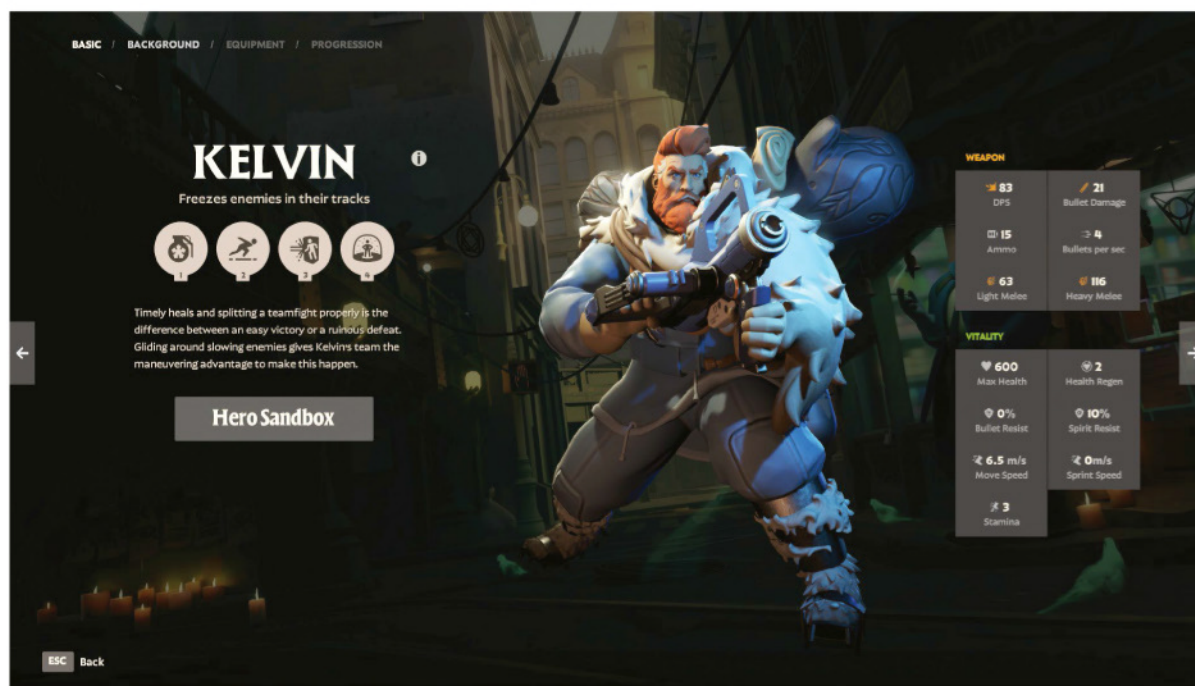
PREVIEW

Deadlock



ABOVE: The roles and meta are yet to be figured out.

RIGHT: Kelvin is an icy boy who shoots a frozen laser beam at you.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
ValvePUBLISHER
ValveLINK
[s.team/a/1422450](https://steam.com/a/1422450)

DEADLOCK

Valve's new MOBA could be your next 1,000-hour game

The 'launch' of *Deadlock* has been one of the weirdest things I've ever seen in this industry, with tens of thousands of players playing a game that officially didn't exist. Even now, with secrecy restrictions lifted, there are no marketing, trailers or even enough screenshots to meet Steam's own rules.

Despite the lack of an official announcement and the game still, at the time of writing, being an invite-only beta, *Deadlock* has captured a significant audience thanks to being a mash-up of hero shooter and MOBA that seems to be pleasing both groups of players.

At the highest level, *Deadlock* is pretty simple, it's a third-person shooter with a roster of 21 characters that all have a unique set of abilities as well as a primary weapon and movement skills. But you are playing on a MOBA-style map in teams of six across four lanes, and to win you have to take down the opponent's Patron, a giant floating golem inside a base that is defended by multiple lines of tower-like fortifications.

It's set in a slightly confused, almost steampunk-style world that has clearly been through a lot of iterations during development, as a few characters feel a little out of place compared to the map. But with little in the way of lore and the map still getting visual updates to add more set dressing, this is an area that is still being worked on.

But the actual playing of *Deadlock*

feels very fleshed-out and, outside of a few balance changes that are clearly needed, it works incredibly well.

The laning stage, where two lanes are filled with two players from each team and two lanes are filled with just one from each team, is unlike any other I've played, even in the likes of *SMITE* and *Paragon* that also feature the shooter style on a MOBA map.

Having to consider things like cover and lines of sight, as well as the unique mechanic of having to shoot orbs that appear from dying creeps to secure extra currency or steal it away from enemies, makes this one of the most active and difficult laning stages in any MOBA. It's where *Deadlock* really excels in its current format, making the early game more challenging than most.

DEADLOCK'S DEPTH

After playing tens of hours, I still don't have the knowledge or experience to know exactly what is happening in chaotic team fights, but I already feel like I know more of what is happening than I did with this level of experience in *Dota* or *LoL*.

But what I do know is that hitting a long-range snipe to pick off a fleeing foe, or locking down the enemy that has been dominating you so they get destroyed, is incredibly satisfying, even if I don't always notice all the kills I get.

With a massive shop of items to explore, some surprisingly deep melee combat options and a map that is still throwing up secrets, it feels like I've only scratched the surface of *Deadlock*, and I'm not going to master it for hundreds of hours. It's a feeling I've not truly felt since learning the likes of *Dota* and *LoL*, which is surely a good sign, and it's also what's keeping me coming back for more.

The real test will be if I keep coming back once I've got all the basics down, and if the much smaller roster of heroes can keep up the variety other MOBAs offer every match. I'm hopeful that will be the case, especially with Valve at the helm, but for now I'm more than happy learning everything *Deadlock* has to offer, and that's likely going to take a few hundred hours anyway.

Mike Stubbs

TO WIN YOU HAVE TO TAKE DOWN THE OPPONENT'S PATRON, A FLOATING GOLEM



The lanes feel very isolated from others



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A KNIGHT'S TALE

How **KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II**, the most ambitious medieval RPG ever made, is taking in-game realism and player immersion to wondrous new heights.

By Robert Jones



Kingdom Come: Deliverance did something that no other RPG had tried to do before when it released back in 2018: create a game based in a fully-realised medieval world that

prided itself in depicting the times and the lives of its characters in a very realistic way.

Here was an RPG in which Henry of Skalitz, the game's raised-by-a-blacksmith peasant protagonist, was no 'chosen one' superhuman fantasy hero, cutting down foes with ease left, right and centre, but instead a regular guy who needed to approach medieval life and the decisions he made in it with both eyes open to the world around him. Insult a noble? Then there's going to be genuine consequences for the lowly Henry. Get caught stealing bread? Henry's going to be branded, imprisoned and

Kingdom Come: Deliverance II

tarred reputationally as a thief. Take on a bunch of three heavily armed soldiers when all Henry is holding is a rusty sword, with which he has no training? Then there are going to be very swift, deadly consequences.

And, what's more, this was an RPG that had no compunction in stripping away many of the softer features of the genre, such as guided waypoints, or from telling a detailed

despite launching notably rough around the edges, immediately became a classic and showed that Warhorse Studios was one to watch.

As such, as I sit down with *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*'s creative director, Daniel Vávra, and game designer, Prokop Jirsa, at Warhorse Studios in Prague, Czechia, to chat about the much-anticipated sequel, which picks up Henry's story

"THE VISION WAS ALWAYS TO BE THIS REALLY AUTHENTIC, OPEN-WORLD RPG"

and complex narrative about politics, economics, and warfare. Henry may eventually rise to do great deeds like a traditional warrior hero, but *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*'s story is a knight's tale that is grounded as much as possible in reality.

The effect of this approach by Warhorse Studios, the maker of the *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* series, on the RPG genre was refreshing, so much so that the original *KC:D*,

after the conclusion of the first game, I have to ask them how this medieval journey all began.

"In 2009, I quit 2K Games and started looking with this game in mind," recalls Vávra. "I designed the whole concept of the game as one person, generally. I had this concept proposal, and basically started to offer it to different publishers and investors, but it was an economic crisis at the time and publishers

DEV PROFILES



Daniel Vávra

TITLE
Creative director

FAVOURITE GAMES
Fallout 2, The Witcher, Jagged Alliance



Prokop Jirsa

TITLE
Game designer

FAVOURITE GAMES
Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines, Albion, The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

didn't believe in the new generation of consoles because they were afraid that mobile phones would kill it. So we had to go to Kickstarter. But, at this time, already, if I showed you the original document for the game, it would be 90% identical with what we have now. I would even say that in the original *KC:D* concept, there were even more features than we have in the game now."

"As I see it," Jirsa adds, "the vision for *Kingdom Come* was always to be this really authentic, open-world RPG that is modern in some ways, but also feels like the good, old-school RPG games where you can really dig deep if you wanted to, and you have options to really explore or do anything at your own pace, where you can really touch anything. So this is a vision of an RPG that feels modern, and is cool for even the young audiences, but has this kind of old-school feeling of those games that were made with heart."

So why did Warhorse Studios set its medieval story, specifically, in the early years of 15th century Bohemia? As anyone who has played the original game can testify, the plot makes use of many actual historical figures and events, within its fictionalised narrative.



Hunting for deer and wild boar is fun and profitable.



1 Resting post-duel. The one-on-one combat is tense, while one-on-multiple enemies is a proper, scary challenge.

2 Sieges are new in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*, with Henry having to act on both sides at times, both offensively and defensively.

3 Antagonist Markvart von Aulitz is back in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*.

4 The landscape of 15th-century Bohemia is frequently stunning in the game.

5 Character concept art.



Kingdom Come: Deliverance II

“Generally, I was pissed a lot by the fact that there was no historical videogame at all,” notes Vávra. “And there’s no reason for that, because in movies and books and everything, they’re very popular. And [there was] this kind of conservatism in the game industry – when you proposed it, everybody would say, ‘It’s weird. There are no monsters’. I was like, ‘There are no monsters in *Call of Duty* as well’. My idea, that there’s a hole in the market, was true [though]. And when people saw it, a lot of them immediately knew that this was something that works. So the sequel is just a continuation of this idea, and we are making it better, and more complex, and more polished.”

“We feel that it’s really something interesting, what’s happening around this time in Bohemia,” explains Jirsa. “And, also, the fact that we are in this place [Prague], and most of the people have this honest connection

period of time and locations that, arguable unfairly, is not widely known about?”

“I think the underlying theme is that we refuse to treat gamers as stupid,” replies Jirsa. “We feel that they would appreciate something new. We feel that if we give them the option to learn something, and you really dig deep, they will appreciate it. We refuse to think about them as some children that have a two-minute attention span. No, you feel that there’s a place in the market for games like ours.”

IMMERSIVE REALISM

That sentiment, that Warhorse Studios feels gamers can handle complex, layered, mature experiences, is no doubt a large reason why the game has become such a cult classic on PC in particular, with many PC gamers pointing to these factors as adding to the game’s

NAVIGATION

As in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, the sequel attempts to deliver a realistic and immersive medieval experience. As such, players need to navigate the game’s in-game world (which is over twice the size of the original game’s) via a map and their reading of the landscape.

“THE UNDERLYING THEME IS THAT WE REFUSE TO TREAT GAMERS AS STUPID”

to this history, to this place. So when we’re saying that we really want to authentically recreate all of these things, it’s much easier to do it with people that are actually living here. We can really go to the places easier. It’s not just one trip. We can go there every 14 days, if we wanted to, and just really research everything, and talk to the people that researched these things for their jobs. It makes it easier for us.”

“The first half of the 15th century is the most interesting because a lot of stuff happened at the time,” states Vávra. “And, at the same time, there’s the biggest amount of different types of weapons and armour and stuff like that. Because 100 years sooner, it would be much less diverse in terms of options for cool things like armour and weapons. And 50 years later, there would be gunpowder weapons, which is too much. It would make armour obsolete. So this kind of gothic period is the most interesting in terms of knights and stuff.”

Did the team ever have any concerns about setting the RPG in a

deep immersion. I ask Vávra and Jirsa how the studio has gone about delivering immersion through a believable world.

“It’s not just for the sake of accuracy that the world feels real,” notes Jirsa. “When you are coming up with a new fantasy RPG, it’s really hard to find the balance that the world feels real, because you need to remember, ‘OK, the people need to eat something, so I need to add some fields. And I need to drink something, so I need to add some streams of water’. The players don’t immediately see it. They will not look at in-game windows, and say, ‘Oh, this window is really real – historically accurate – because I studied it at university’. They actually are. But even those people that don’t know anything about it, when they look around and they see anything – they see the clothing, they see the buildings, they see the weapons – it kind of all fits together. Even if you’re not knowledgeable about the place or time or anything, it kind of feels authentic. You feel

WARFARE

The depiction of medieval warfare has markedly expanded in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*. Now, on top of even more hand-to-hand and ranged combat options, with crossbows and early guns now available to Henry, there are now full-blown sieges to contend with.

LANDSCAPE

Kingdom Come:

Deliverance II is set in its
in capital Bohemia during the
early 15th century, the game's
player explores the region's
stark and beautiful landscapes
as a knight in the Bohemian
army. The game's world is
filled with a variety of
landmarks, including the
Rokycan Mountains, the
antique and stone
formations.

ANIMALS

Building on the original
game, *Kingdom Come:
Deliverance II* is filled with more
animals than ever before, adding to
its realistic portrayal of medieval
life. From horses to ride and dogs
to train and track with, through
to deer, boar and rabbits to
hunt, and on to myriad
domestic animals.



MEDIEVAL METROPOLIS

A look at KC:DII's huge new town of Kuttenberg

Kuttenberg is one of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*'s showpiece new destinations, offering up a proper, large-scale medieval town to explore, inhabit and quest in. Compared to the original *KC:D*'s biggest built-up area, the small market town of Rattay, Kuttenberg is many orders of magnitude larger

and has been modelled with incredible detail and with plenty of period-accurate character. Most impressively, every single citizen in Kuttenberg has their own life and routine that they proceed with every day, imbuing the medieval metropolis with a consistent sense of realism. In medieval times, Kuttenberg was a powerhouse central European trading post.



more immersed in the world because even if you don't know specifically why, it all kind of fits together."

That idea of scalability in terms of player engagement, where the gamer can engage to varying degrees with the game's world and systems to find the fun where they want, is something that Jirsa and Vávra are keen to stress when it comes to in-game reactivity to player decisions.

"There are three layers of that

basically collecting a toll at the road with an illegal document. There are three people standing on the road, in the camp, being rude to people who walk by. Generally, you can go there, and kill them, and then pick up the letter they have, and you will realise that it's false. Or you can argue with them. Or you may bribe them. Or you may poison their food, and they will die, so you don't have to fight with them. Or you may poison their food

"IN ALMOST ALL QUESTS, YOU CAN DECIDE HOW YOU WILL DEAL WITH THE ENEMIES"

reactivity," says Vávra. "The first is this kind of story layer. When you say something, he reacts, but it generally doesn't have that much effect. Then you have those huge impacts where you actually change the whole narrative. And you can play the quest totally differently. And then you have these kind of low-level things. There's a quest, for example, where you have to deal with some guys who are

so that they may fall asleep, and you will steal the letter, and then they will not have any document to back their status up with, and they will leave. And it's quite a natural thing. Or you can stealth kill them. In almost all quests, you can decide how you will deal with the enemies."

From what I've played, I'll look forward to making those choices myself on February 11, 2025. ■

OUTFITTING HENRY

Key pieces of medieval clothing and armour



A full blacksmithing system is now available to Henry.

DEVELOPER DIARY

WEAPON MASTER

Speaking with design director Victor Bocan



o get the authoritative inside scoop on *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*'s newly upgraded combat system,

PC Gamer spoke directly with Viktor Bocan, the man who not only created it for the first *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, but who is now also overseeing how the combat system evolves in the sequel.

What was your overall goal when originally designing *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*'s combat system?

Well, we wanted to introduce you to the sword fighting that is real enough. You know, it's a medieval game. It's a realistic game. We always wanted the combat to feel realistic. The most important thing was the authenticity – that you really felt that you are sword

fighting, and that enemies are sword fighting, and that you are danger, and that they will kill you if there are a lot of enemies at once, and you need to somehow approach the combat as you would in real life. Like, there are three guys, so I need to focus on one, and move so that he is in the way of others, and they cannot get to me. Or you fight some tight places where they don't just surround me. And I run away if that's the only option.

What changes have you made to the combat system for *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*?

First we reduced the number of zones you have in the combat, because it was like you could attack from five directions in the first game, and then you had a stabbing attack – actually, two stabbing attacks. You could stab in the chest or in the face. So it was actually seven possible ways to

DEV PROFILE



Victor Bocan

TITLE
Design director

FAVOURITE GAMES
Elden Ring, *Shadow of the Erdtree*, *Sid Meier's Civilization*, *World of Warcraft*

attack. And it would get a little confusing at times. It was maybe too much. And there was something you could stab with an axe, which is a little bit weird. It's realistic – you can still stab with an axe or mace – but it looks weird, and it looks like some systematic part of the gameplay that isn't, you know, realistic or authentic. It's just there because the game system works like this. So we tried to move away from this approach. We have these tight controls, and we do everything systematically, and move to more what you would do with an axe; what you would do with a mace. In this, we do in a way that's a bit more approachable.

How did you go about researching all the medieval weapons and fighting techniques?

We're cooperating with many sword groups [such as] Historical European Martial Arts – HEMA. It's people who studied the old manuscripts, and read the old texts and books, and try to reconstruct how combat really looked back then. They are not academics, they are enthusiasts. They studied these old manuscripts, and think about it. And then they are swordsmen, so they try it. They understood the techniques because they tried it in



Each of the game's handheld weapons now plays differently.



combat. So we are talking to these people, and they are helping us a lot.

How do the weapons in the game differ in terms of technicalities?

In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* we had different weapons. They had different stats. But technically we used the same animation. Of course, we had

It's very slow. It hits very hard, but it's slower. And then you have a halberd, which is the slowest, but very long. So you can keep your distance [from the enemy]. He can still block you, but he cannot counteract you from the block because he's too far. So you have a weapon for every different occasion or different style.

"YOU PRAY TO THE GODS THAT IT WILL NOT BLOW UP IN YOUR FACE"

different animations for short swords and long swords, because you hold it in one or two hands. But the mace, the axe, they were all the same. So now we said at the start that every weapon should be a little bit different. The sword is fast. It's swift and cool swordsmanship that you perform there. The mace or the axe is brutal.

Can you talk about the new ranged weapons, and balancing them?

Getting the balance is very simple. The longer it gets to aim or arm or load, then the bigger a hit it is. At the low point, there is a very quick riding bow that you really quickly draw and shoot. And you can shoot arrow after arrow, but they're very weak, of course. And

there are longbows. We had them already on *KCD*, which take some time to load, but the hit is much stronger. And we just prolonged this. So you have a crossbow that takes a lot of time to load, but they're strong. And then there is this heavy firearm, which is a really realistic and authentic firearm that takes ages. And then you generally one-shot [kill], because if you miss, you have absolutely no time to load it again. And you miss easily because you cannot aim with it properly. You hold it under your arm. You pray to the gods that it will not blow up in your face, and it actually can if you do not take care of your guns. You know, clean it often, and repair it. At some point, it can just blow up when you try to shoot it. So you need to take care of it. But if you hit, you will kill anything and anyone – a knight with his horse, and his horse behind him. So that's great. But you have just one shot.

Finally, how have you changed how shields work in *KC:DII*?

We've introduced the breaking of shields. So if you block a lot with a shield, it will eventually deplete its status [and] it will just fall out, and fall down, and you are without a shield. You can do the same for the enemies, though. And, of course, as a player, you are responsible for your gear, and if you take care of it you are fine. But enemies – they are not that great. They are not very good people. They are bandits. They don't care. So it's very easy for you to break their shields, and then they are shield-less. ■

RETURNING FAMILIAR FACES

Henry can look forward to hanging with...



HANS CAPON

A young Bohemian noble and heir to the market town of Rattay. Hans remains Henry's closest compatriot. Missions and mischief await.



FATHER GODWIN

A former mercenary and now priest, but one with a taste for both wine and women. Father Godwin originally hailed from a noble family.

LEFT: The attention to detail in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*'s outfits, armour, weapons and shields is astonishing.

PC GAMER

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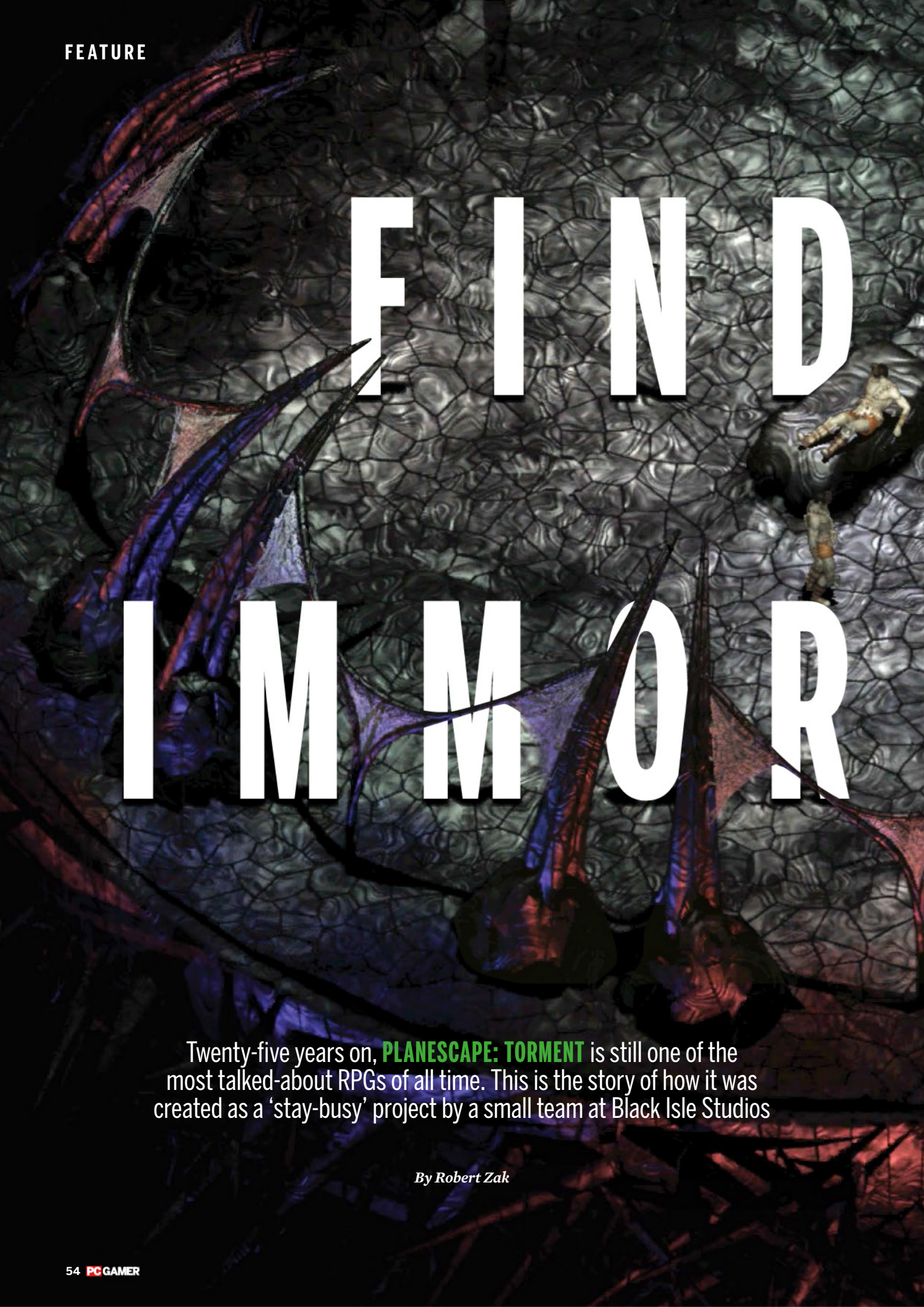
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FIND IMMOR



Twenty-five years on, **PLANESCAPE: TORMENT** is still one of the most talked-about RPGs of all time. This is the story of how it was created as a 'stay-busy' project by a small team at Black Isle Studios

By Robert Zak

ING TALITY

Sigil, The City of Doors, isn't like other cities. It's not a place of orderly brick walls and cobbled streets, foggy taverns and candlelit keeps. It's not inspired by myths, fairytales, or folklore, and it can't be contained in a single aesthetic; steampunk, biopunk, dieselpunk look sensible and uniform next to Sigil's rusting, jagged architectures; an inn may look like a chitinous fossil, a shop of curiosities may be framed by massive blades that look

like they were designed to deter the grasp of a wrathful deity. And that alley over there? Watch closely, and it may just give birth to a new street before your eyes.

Even though you can eventually become familiar with Sigil's web of dreamlike rules – where a door might be a bloodstained cloth, or a key takes the form of a feeling – a thousand questions still remain: Who is the mysterious governess of the city, The Lady of Pain? What are her motives? How was Sigil created, and why is it floating like a planetary ring atop an impossibly tall



Modron - You see a cube with two arms, two legs, and two small wings sprouting from its sides. On the front of the cube is an animated face. As you approach, the creature focuses its eyes upon you.

Nameless One - "Greetings."

Modron - The creature focuses emotionless eyes on you. "Greetings, adventurer. Welcome to Rubikon, the dungeon construct. Thank you for choosing Rubikon for your dungeoning experience. You may access Rubikon through this door."

1. "What is Rubikon?"
2. "What is a dungeon construct?"
3. "Never mind, I've got to go. Farewell."

33393



mountain in the middle of an spatially shifting wasteland?

While much of the Planescape setting remains a mystery, its videogame iteration is well charted, and something of a holy site for PC gamers, who regularly make the pilgrimage through Sigil and its neighbouring planes as The Nameless One and his not-so-merry band of companions. Zeb Cook's Planescape setting may predate the game, but it's only through the game that tangible form was given to a world that defies convention.

Like the setting, *Planescape: Torment's* development also didn't play by typical rules. It was a side-project by a self-described B-team of developers at Black Isle Studios, many of whom had little experience in game development, little familiarity with the *Planescape* setting, and yet coalesced to create one of the greatest RPGs in PC gaming history. This is the story of how it came together.

BLACK SHEEP, BLACK ISLE

In 1997, Interplay Entertainment was fomenting a CRPG revolution. The prolific publisher was simultaneously overseeing development of *Fallout*, *Planescape: Torment* and *Baldur's Gate*. At the heart of this was Interplay producer



Feergus Urquhart, who in 1996 founded Black Isle Studios and was also tasked with leading the RPG division at Interplay, ensuring that development was progressing smoothly across these projects.

But the beginnings of *Torment* were anything but smooth. "I was just trying to figure everything out, and I noticed that there were three *Planescape* projects that all had like

four people on them," Urquhart recalls. This was a time when 3DFX cards were picking up momentum, and developers were swarming to create new 3D games using their own engines. One of these *Planescape* projects was to be such a game – a first-person 3D-accelerated dungeon crawler – while "almost no work was being done" on one of the other *Planescape* titles. Urquhart scrapped

WAYS TO PLAY

Planescape: Torment doesn't offer the traditional classes



STORY MODE (OPTIMAL)

Thief Class:
WIS 18+, INT 15+, DEX 14+, CHA 13

Torment is a story-led game, and this type of build ensures that you get the maximum amount of exposition through dialogue options (via high Intelligence) and recollection of memories (via high Wisdom). The Thief class is best suited to this type of playthrough, as it unlocks the Stealth skill, which you can use to skirt around some of the more frustrating combat encounters in the game.



BRUTE MODE

Fighter Class: STR 16+, WIS 17+, CON 12+, CHA 12+

The Nameless One is, by default, a warrior, and if you find it too unbecoming to skulk around in the shadows, then boost those strength stats, pick up a two-handed hammer, and get swinging. High Strength is good for evil builds, as it unlocks intimidation-based dialogue options. High Wisdom is still recommended to get those all-important flashbacks that flesh out the story.



MAGIC MODE

Mage Class: INT 18+, WIS 17+, CHA 13

Learning the arcane arts in *Torment* is both challenging and rewarding. On the one hand, you need to rest to recharge spells, which isn't ideal because resting places can be quite scarce (especially once you leave Sigil). On the other hand, you'll be pouring points into Intelligence, which both unlocks dialogue options and strengthens spellcasting, so there's a nice synergy there.



A GROTESQUELY SCARRED DEAD-FLESHED MAN AFFLICTED WITH IMMORTALITY

these disparate projects and rolled them into one.

"I said, 'OK, we need a game that we can go and actually just make without inventing new technology. We're going to use the *Baldur's Gate* engine, and differentiate ourselves by having a character who's not just going to be a generic character, and we're going to reinforce that by zooming in the camera."

This character was The Nameless One, a grotesquely scarred dead-fleshed man afflicted with immortality, which results in him losing his memory each time he is resurrected after meeting his death. His story wouldn't be one of toppling wayward gods or saving the land, but

simply finding out who he is, piecing together clues as to his previous incarnations with the help of readable scars, Dodecahedron diaries, strange characters, and a host of companions that include a succubus committed to celibacy, a rugged redheaded fiendling, and a floating, wise-cracking skull called

Morte. Sure, you could unleash an iron golem intent on destroying the multiverse in the name of entropy, or decide whether to let a vengeful angel live and continue his war on the heavens, but these

matters were peripheral to your journey: finding out who you were in the past, while shaping who you are in the present through your actions and words. It's a story of identity, reconciliation and redemption, rather than idealised heroism.

Story and zoom level weren't the only ways in which *Torment* would distinguish itself from its fantasy cousin, *Baldur's Gate*. The fledgling team at Black Isle would push the Infinity Engine to its limit in the name of crafting its singular story and strange world.

Torment's lead programmer and lead artist, Dan Spitzley and Tim Donley, were just a couple of years into their careers when they were called up by Urquhart. With much of the studio's focus, and many of its key developers, on the never-to-be-completed *Stonekeep 2*, it was a case of giving those outside the flagship project something to stay busy with. "[Urquhart] just came one day and said 'We're going to do a *Planescape* game,' and in my head I'm going 'What the fuck is that?'" Donley tells me. "At the time it seemed so different, I was like 'Is this like steampunk or space, or science fiction?'"

Planescape was a D&D setting that didn't really have visual form at the time, and with Interplay management paying little attention to its development, *Torment* provided an opportunity for experimentation that other games weren't afforded. "Planescape was not a very well

ABOVE: The Modron Maze is a semi-randomised spoo of old-school dungeon crawling.



known property,” Spitzley begins. “Certainly it didn’t have a bunch of games already, so there were a lot of things we could try to do that other teams might not have been inclined to.”

There were people familiar with the Planescape setting at Interplay (including its co-creators David Cook and Colin McComb). *Torment*’s lead designer was also a fan, though he was a bit of a mystery to Black Isle developers at first. “Down the hall from me was this guy that would always just go into his office and close the door,” Donley recalls. “You never really knew who he was. All we knew is he was working on *Descent to Undermountain*.” This initially elusive man was Chris Avellone, *Torment*’s lead designer and creator of its now-seminal story.

Avellone (who was sadly unavailable for interview) outlined his design philosophy in the game’s vision statement to Interplay management. Amid colourful digs at traditional fantasy (“Fireball spells can go hide in the fucking corner when you unleash your arsenal,” “Forget fragile elves, rock-humping dwarves, worthless hobbits and with them, the mind-numbing boredom of every RPG ever released”) his message to the development team was clear: “If you want to create something, don’t use your first instinct. Stop for a moment, then put a spin on the idea.”

Once he emerged from his bunker, Avellone was the driving force of the game. “Chris was great from the jump. When you’d say, ‘I want to do this,’ he would say, ‘You tell me what it would take and then help me understand,’” says Donley. “That really set the stage for ‘How

can we get this done in the best way possible’ versus ‘this is just what you have to do.’”

This openness to ideas and imperative to invert and subvert RPG tropes is felt in every alley, establishment, and dark corner of Sigil. Rats weren’t just disposable early-game fodder, but part of Many-as-One, an intelligent rat hive mind living beneath the city. This rat collective is at war with the Dead Nations, a civilised society of undead contesting with the rat gestalt for the underground. It’s a world in which angels are liars, devils are compelled to tell the truth, brothels are for

**RATS WEREN'T
JUST DISPOSABLE
EARLY-GAME FODDER, BUT
PART OF A HIVE-MIND**

satiating lusts of the mind rather than the body, and death was not a game-over-and-reload, but an endemic part of the journey.

This subversion translated to Sigil’s architecture too, which shunned the medieval fantasy stylings that were ubiquitous in videogame RPGs up to that point. The city was unabologetically ugly, with buildings that resemble insect hives or rusty barricades from colossal conflicts. The few buildings that are familiar, like wooden shacks, are run-down and suffocated by the oppressive architecture; in fact, the most traditional-looking location, the

Buried Village, was pushed beneath the ground by the Lady of Pain on a whim, and is now a half-buried hideout for miscreants.

In the same way that Urquhart gave unexpected opportunities to Spitzley and Donley, Donley in turn recruited untested developers to what he described (himself included) as the “Dirty Dozen” of Interplay at the time. Dennis Presnell, now lead environment artist on Obsidian’s upcoming RPG *Avowed*, was brought onto this team of talented misfits. “I was a college dropout for all intents and purposes, and I’d always been very interested in digital art,” he recalls. “Tim got me a cracked copy of Lightwave [the 3D animation software used for *Torment*], and I learned it just by pressing buttons and seeing what it did. I was terrible at the time, but I was given an extraordinary opportunity.”

Another of Donley’s discoveries was Eric Campanella, who designed and animated all party companions in the game.

Starting out as a 2D artist with no track record in 3D modelling, Campanella asked Donley if he could try his hand at creating a character. Donley recalls the encounter: “I was like, ‘Have you made a 3D model before?’” He’s like, ‘No, but I’d like to try.’ And we just said, ‘Knock yourself out.’” Not knowing what to expect, Donley says: “It was like fucking Da Vinci,” when he first went into Campanella’s workshop. “The guy turned out to be one of the best 3D modellers I’ve ever seen. Back then characters were like less than 1,000, 500 polygons, but he just understood anatomy so well. Every one of the companion models was built in a day or less, except maybe The Nameless One.”

ABOVE: The Mortuary marks the beginning and end of The Nameless One’s elliptical journey.





INFINITY AND BEYOND

The amount of detail in the character models was just one of many ways in which Black Isle Studios “ran roughshod over some of the standards that BioWare had put in place for the engine, probably for good reason,” as Spitzley put it.

BioWare was building the Infinity Engine concurrently at the same time as Black Isle was using it to make *Torment*. While there was plenty of cooperation between the two studios, there wasn’t a lot of oversight, so the buccaneering team made *Torment* much by their own rules. “We were

wide-eyed optimists, so we’d say, ‘Well, why can’t we have this big old wall of rotating, animating gears in our tile set?’” Dan Spitzley tells me. “We were able to animate the tiles themselves and then slap larger sprites – which a lot of those gears on the wall were – on top of that, but it all used external memory so we were lucky we didn’t break the game.”

This is how *Torment* ended up with animated backgrounds where molten metal would visibly ooze in the Foundry, or the great golem Coaxmetal would rotate and swing his hammer. To help Sigil feel even more alive, special crowd AI was programmed in. “In *Fallout* and *Baldur’s Gate* you’d have NPCs just kind of milling around, but in *Torment* we really tried to make it feel more like this is a bustling city,” Urquhart begins. “So we wrote in a whole thing to allow these crowd characters to walk around the maps. We had to create a whole different class of character so that the AI didn’t bring the game to a halt.” The Infinity Engine wasn’t designed with any of this stuff in mind, but Black Isle knew no better and made it work with brute force.

Donley recalls one time when Black Isle went to BioWare’s HQ in Edmonton, Canada, to show their progress on *Torment*. Within

NEW AND IMPROVED

How *Torment* broke the rule book



1 MOVING BACKGROUNDS

Breaking the Infinity Engine rule book at the time, Black Isle added animated elements to the backgrounds.

2 LOOKING ALIVE

Created by fledgling 3D animator Eric Campanella in around a day, each companion model was completely unique and brimming with animations.

3 TIME FOR YOUR CLOSE-UP

One of the first things Black Isle did to differentiate *Torment* from *Baldur’s Gate* was zoom the camera in, creating a more intimate feel.





✦ moments of arriving, BioWare CEO Ray Muzyka piled the Black Isle envoy and a couple of dozen BioWare developers into a conference room for the big *Torment* showcase.

Spitzley loaded up the very beginning of the game, where The Nameless One rises off the slab in the Mortuary.

"It was almost 300 frames of animation, which was ridiculous for him getting off the slab and then walking around. There's a fade-in, The Nameless One gets off the slab, he starts walking around, and Ray is silent for a while," Donley remembers. "Then he turns to his programmer and goes, 'You guys told me we couldn't have that many

frames of animation. How come the game looks so good?'"

The *Torment* team returned from Edmonton with BioWare's approval. Meanwhile, developers were regularly shuffled between the *Fallout* and *Torment* teams, which meant certain ideas would be coming back from *Fallout*'s development and being merged into *Torment*, such as chat bubbles above background NPCs' heads, and implementation of choices and consequences.

SEEDY VIBES

Planescape's soundscape was dark, atmospheric and adaptive. Where in the daytime you might hear the

comforting simmer of food cooking on a stove, at night in that same place you'll hear rats scurrying around in the pipes. Sigil was alive with bespoke chatter in different areas. Even within a single area you'd shift through multiple zones with their own background ambience, giving Sigil the vibe of a seedy metropolis.

The instructions for sound designer Charles Deenen were much the same as for other departments: take an idea, and get weird with it. Deenen, who was working on multiple projects at Interplay, including *Fallout 2*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Descent to Undermountain*, saw *Planescape* as a bit of an escape from

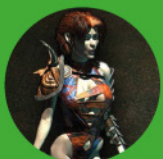
MEET THE TEAM

Each companion has dialogue for multiple scenarios. Here are some of their most memorable lines:



MORTE

"Women were the reason I became a monk... and, uhh, the reason I switched back"



ANNAH

"Oh yeah, you trying to sit in my lap would make a grand tale... and a short one."



DAK'KON

"It is said that what a flawed man sees, his hands make broken."



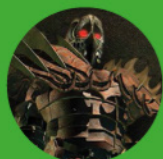
FALL-FROM-GRACE

"Time is not your enemy, forever is."



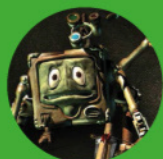
IGNUS

"When the Planes burn and all life is but torches, then Ignus shall at last be at peace."



VHAILOR

"Nothing on all the Planes that can stay the hand of justice when it is brought against them."



NORDOM

"I think therefore I am... I think."

the more rigid requirements of other games. "There was never any true overshadowing direction on *Planescape*," Deenen tells me. "It was never like, 'You have to do this or that,' because nobody knew. We were inventing the sound of a new world. There were no boundaries on me, and I wasn't imposing boundaries on others unless they went completely off the rails."

Many of the game's sounds were re-pitched and distorted versions of something else entirely. The sound of strange crickets at night was in fact camels pitched down to deep levels, while glass vases would be used for unearthly ambient vocals. One of the designers even used the cries of their teething infant for the haunting soundscape of the Mortuary; using the sounds of a baby for a place pervaded by death – yet also endless rebirth for The Nameless One – was eerily appropriate.

Like he did for many other games, Deenen used Barbara Harris' walla group for *Torment*, a company that has provided background crowd sounds for hundreds of Hollywood movies, games and TV shows. For *Baldur's Gate*, the group

provided the ambience for medieval markets and bustling taverns, but in *Torment* their work extended into far weirder realms. "It would be like, 'OK, now you're the Pillar of Skulls,' and half of them wouldn't even be doing vocals, they'd just be making these weird noises," Deenen recalls. "We'd have them walk around with microphones in a big

SIGIL WAS ALIVE
WITH BESPOKE
CHATTER IN
DIFFERENT AREAS

room and we would use that to create these lively ambiances." Layered with Mark Morgan's reverberating, ethereal soundtrack, *Torment* sounded every bit like the world-between-worlds that it was.

Beyond being cited as an inspiration for many games – from *Dragon Age: Origins* to *Disco*

Elysium – *Torment's* influence is wide-reaching. *Dark Souls* may have spawned an entire genre of games that integrate death into the design and narrative, but *Torment* had introduced this idea over 20 years earlier. Party companions today are almost a given in a certain style of RPG, but, "*Torment* really showed what you could do with companions," says Urquhart.

"You had companions in *Fallout 1*, *Fallout 2* and *Baldur's Gate* for that matter, but they had no real dialogue. *Torment* was the first game that made them feel like fully functional parts of the story."

Urquhart went on to found Obsidian Entertainment, taking many of *Torment* and Black Isle's developers with him, where that untethered creative spirit still drives their games to this day. "Given *Torment's* setting, there was an enormous amount of freedom there," Presnell, now an environment artist at Obsidian, tells me. "I have a similar philosophy in the way that I work now at Obsidian. Never do what's expected. I really encourage people on my team to have a strong vision for whatever it is that they do and not have fear about exploring interesting ideas."

Planescape was never too far from Obsidian's thoughts, and Urquhart was interested in working with the IP until InXile Entertainment began a Kickstarter campaign for *Torment: Tides of Numenera* in 2013. "I think that kind of closed the door for us," he says, before revealing who he'd really like to see work with the IP. "Chris Avellone was just so attached to *Torment* and about how he made it. It wouldn't be something we would make, but I think it would be awesome to see Chris take another stab at *Torment*."

Whatever the future holds, *Planescape: Torment* was the creation of a team that, almost by chance, found itself with immense freedom to visualise and realise a game that compels endless discussions to this day. 25 years on – aeons in gaming terms – The Nameless One still remains immortal, whether he likes or not. ■

ABOVE: Hang out with a (sort of) civilised society of undead in the Dead Nations.

Sigil remains one of the most architecturally distinct cities in gaming.



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Heart stealer

Star Wars Outlaws is a good game. Not a great one, sure, as our review this issue shows, but an experience that will definitely steal your heart to some degree. Well, providing that you lean into its strengths and not its weaknesses, that is. This game is at its best when it slips into full *Tomb Raider* mode. You know what I mean. The gameplay loop of infiltrate hidden or guarded loot site, squeeze through some handily placed cracks, climb some walls, shimmy along some ledges, swing on some grappling hooks, sneak by some guards, solve some environmental puzzles, then grab the treasure and leg it out of there, often under gunfire. Often, though, this solid core is buried under a weak main story and plenty of forgettable, by-the-numbers characters with not much soul. Just remember to steal first, shoot second.

R. Jones

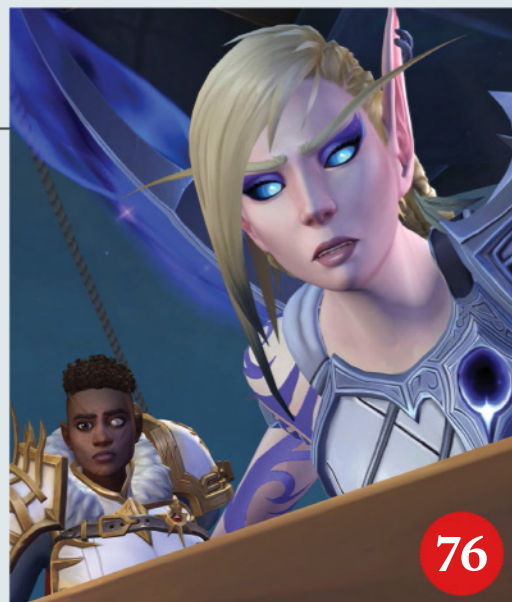
ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's Force-sensitive reviewers...



FRASER BROWN

Specialist in
Nude sunbathing

Currently playing
Sins of a Solar Empire 2

This month
Was spotted in nothing but his birthday suit and a pair of Ray-Bans catching rays. Fresh.



ROBIN VALENTINE

Specialist in
Crushing heresy

Currently playing
WH40K: Space Marine 2

This month
Was implanted with gene-seed and turned into a Primaris Space Marine. Which was nice.



MORGAN PARK

Specialist in
Greedo's pants

Currently playing
Star Wars Outlaws

This month
Renamed his guinea pig Nix and commanded it to steal nuggs from the local Maccy D's.



ABBIE STONE

Specialist in
Card counting

Currently playing
Dungeons & Degenerate Gamblers

This month
Played blackjack with a giant rat in the PCG Towers basement.



MATT ELLIOTT

Specialist in
Outdated references

Currently playing
Alan Wake

This month
Rented Slumber Party Massacre 2 only to find the last renter hadn't rewound the tape. Grr!



FAR FAR AWAY

STAR WARS OUTLAWS succeeds at the little things, but not much else shines

By Morgan Park

Can we agree that we all have that one game studio we think about more than others? For me it's Ubisoft. Ubisoft has the reputation of a trend-chasing collection of studios that make the same types of open world games over and over, but not enough people talk about the cool, unexpected, or just plain weird little touches its games have that no other massive publisher would ever green-light.

I'm talking about the good stuff, like *Assassin's Creed Mirage's* robust codex of ancient Baghdad museum pieces, *Rainbow Six Siege's* overkill destruction engine, *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora's* ambitious exploration mode that turns every waypoint into contextual directions so you develop a real sense of mastery over the planet's geography.

Star Wars Outlaws is both sides of Ubisoft: it's conventional and safe in ways that really get on my nerves, but it's also ambitious enough to be more than just a third-person shooter in a sandbox. *Outlaws* is a game in which nearly every story mission involves crawling through a vent that leads to a ladder that leads to a hallway. It's also a game with a reactive reputation

system that matters, detailed cities I didn't want to leave, and maybe my favourite side activity ever.

STREET URCHIN

One of those good ideas is Kay Vess, *Outlaws'* wide-eyed protagonist with a background that reads like every D&D party's rogue: She grew up on the streets of Canto Bight (the casino planet from *The Last Jedi*), running jobs and taking scores from a young age. Kay is smart and arrogant in a Solo sort of way, but she's also less impulsive and slower to solve every problem with a blaster. She's instantly likable, and scores extra points with me for having nothing to do with lightsabers or the Force. There's a distinct lack of self-importance to

Kay is smart and arrogant in a Solo sort of way, but also less impulsive

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world Star Wars game from Ubisoft in which blasters rule and lightsabers drool.

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Massive

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 9900KS,
32GB RAM,
Nvidia GeForce
RTX 2080 Super

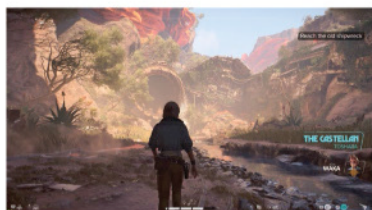
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
ubisoft.com/en-us/game/star-wars/outlaws

Outlaws that I appreciate. The game's best moments tend to happen between quests when I'm walking through a city looking to make or spend some Credits. I love how easy it is to fall into the scoundrel roleplay in *Outlaws* – picking up odd jobs, shopping for obscure blaster parts, playing arcade machines, betting on races, cashing out in Sabacc.

Man, I can't stop thinking about Sabacc, easily *Outlaws'* strongest minigame. It's basically simplified poker where every player tries to make the smallest possible pair, but with variables that add surprising depth. Special cards, like one that copies whatever card is next to it, can save Kay from a bad draw at the last second. Players can also play special medals that trigger instant effects, like forcing all players to throw another chip in the pot or preventing them from drawing more cards. You actually have to collect these medals in the world at vendors or by stealing them from vaults.

A lot of effort for a minigame, right? That's something I picked up early about *Outlaws*: it takes its side stuff seriously, so much that I was often more invested in my Sabacc

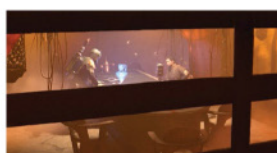


ABOVE: Your reputation with a faction often determines how big of a discount you'll get with vendors, which can be a big deal.



Outlaws has loads of bespoke caves and locations created just for one or two quests.

Rare tech needed for upgrades can be stolen, or tracked down from a roving vendor in the wilds.



ABOVE: Sneaking around cities is lower stakes than out in the wilds. You can't pull a gun, and getting caught will get you thrown out of a gang's territory.

FAR RIGHT: When Kay is moving toward a dilapidated structure of some sort, you know *Outlaws* is switching to *Uncharted* mode.

deck (it's Gwent all over again) and pile of incomplete sidequests than the main story. Well, that and food.

Each of *Outlaws*' four major cities has a unique street food spot where Kay and Nix can take a break from all the vent-crawling and skull-cracking. I expected the interaction to be as quick as buying anything else in *Outlaws* – that I'd press X on a picture of an alien steak and Kay would get +2 damage for an hour or something. Instead, I was treated to a three-minute interactive cutscene starting with the droid chef cooking and presenting the dish: Che Mosska, described as "slow-grilled sweet mosska on the cob, freshly picked from the steppes of Toshara".

The whole sequence was so warm and inviting. Watching the way Nix sniffed each element of the dish before scarfing it down, and how Kay intentionally backed off to let her little pal eat as much as she wanted, told me everything I needed to know about their relationship. They love trying new things together. They'd do anything for each other.

Nix collapsed backwards with a full belly and satisfied grin as the Che Mosska became a new gear slot, a 'Nix Treat,' unlocking her ability to kick away grenades in a firefight. I was already happy to have dropped 200 Credits on the adorable slice of life, but like so many elements of *Outlaws*, worldbuilding feeds directly into progression.



THE BADDIES

Meet the crime bosses of the Outer Rim



PYKES SYNDICATE

Leader: Gorak

Found on: Toshara, Akiva

The first main faction that Kay encounters. They're a tough, but fair bunch of crooks that share Toshara with the Empire. They're the most buttoned up, money-minded gang of the bunch.

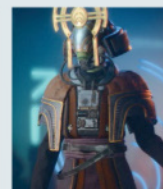


CRIMSON DAWN

Leader: Qi'ra

Found on: Toshara, Kijimi

This is the same gang that Han Solo tangles with his standalone movie, and it's run by his ex. Crimson Dawn is an underhanded faction, smart and manipulative, but will always offer Kay an option to get on their good side.

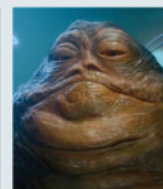


ASHIGA CLAN

Leader: Queen Ashiga

Found on: Kijimi

The smallest gang in *Outlaws*, the Ashiga are an insular group with a tight grip on its homeworld of Kijimi. They only have one real enemy, Crimson Dawn, but some elements of the faction have bigger ambitions.



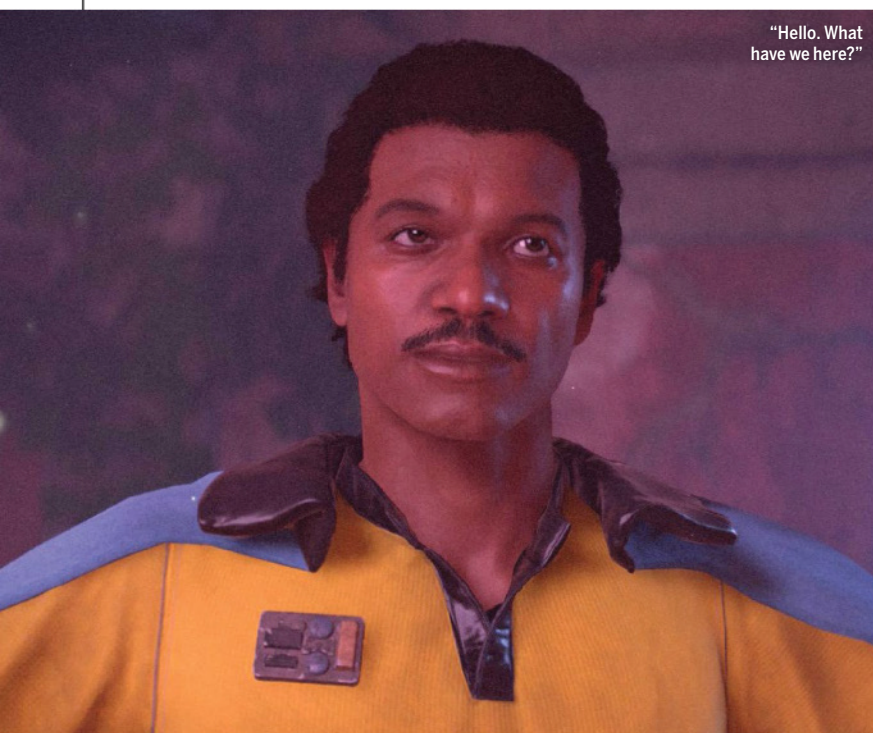
HUTT CARTEL

Leader: Jabba

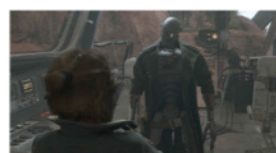
Found on: Tatooine, Akiva

The familiar Hutts enjoy a background role in *Outlaws*. They have a respectable presence on Akiva and you can even find work for them on Toshara, but not until Kay gets to Tatooine that they become a big player.

REVIEW
Some of the vehicles are based on the original line of Kenner toys from the 1970s, unseen in the films.
Gamenamexxxx



"Hello. What have we here?"



ROGUE ONES

I wish I had as much of a good time with the story as I did goofing around in cities. *Outlaws'* main thread follows Kay assembling a crew for a heist, the spoils of which would allow her to clear the bounty on her head and finally live free of the Empire. It's a fun Soderbergh-style setup, but it flattens out early on and never really picks up. A majority of the main quests are spent looking for potential crew members, not actually interacting with them, so once they finally join the Trailblazer, they become silent NPCs with only occasional ship chatter. The only consistent voice in your ear is ND-5, a prequel-era droid assigned to Kay by the heist's architect.

Playing *Outlaws* sometimes felt like two different games. When I was working through sidequests, it's like I was playing a scoundrel simulator where Kay is a cool, mysterious thief-for-hire taking jobs from anyone with enough Credits to pay. Once I got around to the main quests, *Outlaws* switched to Star Wars *Uncharted* mode: Climbing up rocks, shimmying ledges, jumping across gaps that are supposed to be suspenseful, but aren't. It's really weak stuff, and Ubi makes you do a ton of it as part of big set-piece missions with beautiful backdrops of Imperial ships and droid factories.

It's not a sin unique to *Outlaws*, but these platforming sequences play

ABOVE: ND-5 is Kay's right-hand droid, not much of a wisecracker but a reluctant mentor without much in the way of personality.

BIG IRON *Breaking down Kay's blaster*



Kay relies on her trusty blaster to get out of every jam, but unlike Han Solo, her big iron is basically three guns in one.



PLASMA

Standard red shooty bolts that come in rapid fire and heavy variants. You can upgrade accuracy and cooling as well as damage.



ION

Used for solving puzzles and to quickly scrap droids or shields. Can be converted into a shotgun blast.



POWER

Charged shots to destroy obstacles and kill just about anything. The grenade launcher variant is also fun.



like Ubi was terrified that I might not know exactly where to go at every moment. Climbing routes are linear and obvious, with very little puzzle variety to break things up. Apparently every planet in the Star Wars galaxy is littered with powerful fans that can only be turned off by shooting a little pylon.

SCHOOL FOR SCOUNDRELS

When *Outlaws* isn't doing a Naughty Dog impression, it's a pretty good stealth game. I'm still surprised by just how sneaky the game is, and not just because it has a crouch button and tall grass. Most open-world games these days have stealth, but they're not stealth games. *Outlaws* is an exception: Kay Vess is portrayed first and foremost as a thief, not a gunslinger, and most of her moveset revolves around dropping as few bodies as possible. She knocks guards out from behind like you'd expect, but she can also signal Nix to pull a guard's attention, sabotage alarms, or trigger explosive distractions.

The spaces Kay sneaks through are classic Ubi compounds: multi-level, mostly outdoor arenas with guards hanging out just far enough away from each other that I never felt like a confrontation was forced. Which is good, because Kay only has one ranged knockout option.

Kay's blaster has a single-shot stun mode that will knock out any basic guard, but it has a long

cooldown. When I think about the last decade of open-world games (many made by Ubisoft) that instantly undercut the drama of sneaking by giving me a silenced pistol that turns off any human obstacle, Ubi's restraint here is all the more impressive. *Outlaws* pushes me to play it more like *Thief* than *Dishonored*.

GO AND GET IT

'Pursue' is an important verb in *Outlaws*. Ubi has devised one of the more unusual upgrade systems I've seen in an open-world game, ditching a levelling system for what's essentially a galactic scavenger hunt.

As part of the main story and optional sidequests, Kay meets 'experts' who unlock new abilities in every discipline of outlaw-hood: a mechanic that offers Speeder upgrades, an ex-syndicate gunslinger

with blaster tips, a gambler, a mercenary, a slicer who blows the hacking minigame wide open. The fun part is that none of these abilities are free – they all have a checklist of simple challenges locked behind them (straightforward stuff like 'headshot bad guys' or vague stuff like 'make Nix happy') as well as a special crafting material. Sometimes that material can be purchased from a merchant deep in Syndicate territory, but often you'll have to lift it from a gang stronghold, Imperial base, or elaborate cave puzzle.

Experts feed in nicely to the 'scoundrel fantasy' that Ubi has been selling *Outlaws* on since the beginning. It wasn't just talk: Kay's progression is cleverly linked to the network of underworld contacts she cultivates as a freshly hatched criminal, sidestepping some of the disbelief that we usually have to suspend with videogame power-ups. Why can Kay suddenly hack better? Not because she's level five, but because she met a master slicer who showed her some moves. Is Kay an accomplished speeder mechanic? No, but she knows a guy who knows a guy.

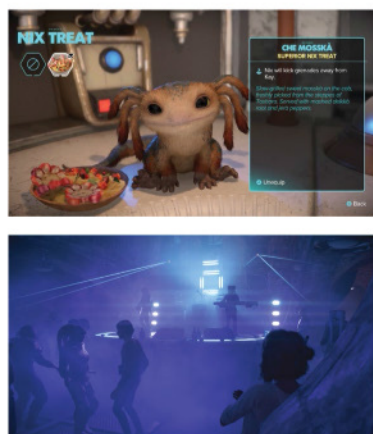
Outlaws is everything good and bad about big-budget open-world excess. There's so much going on between its main quests, sidequests, gear quests, rumours, treasure hunts, and contracts, and yet fundamental fun videogame stuff like getting from place to place falls flat. One hour I'm totally engrossed eavesdropping on Stormtroopers plotting to fix the Fathier races, and the next I'm moaning at yet another boring climbing section.

I wish it took bigger risks with combat and doubled down on stealth opportunities, but dammit, roleplaying a scoundrel is some of the best fun I've had with anything Star Wars. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Behind every conventional element of *Star Wars Outlaws* is a little bit of that old Ubisoft magic.

73



ABOVE: *Outlaws*' open world is brimming with cantinas, several of which have live music.



Oh, not these guys again.

YELLOW CARD

Flawed deckbuilder **DUNGEONS AND DEGENERATE GAMBLERS** rarely plays a winning hand

By Abbie Stone

This roguelike deckbuilder is a game with its tongue so far in its cheek that it would be in danger of losing that tongue if someone were to, say, punch it in the face. Unfortunate, given that this fun, clever riff on blackjack is often face-punchingly frustrating.

If you're a living saint who knows nothing about the sinful world of gambling, blackjack is a game wherein you and your opponent take turns drawing from individual decks of playing cards. You're both trying to get a score that adds up to 21.

Make a higher number and you bust, meaning you'll almost definitely lose, unless your opponent is courteous enough to bust too.

D&DG's first twist is that you have a consistent pool of 100 health to worry about, and every time you lose, you take the difference in score as damage. Say your opponent has hit 21 and you're on 18. If you stick with that, you'll take 3 damage. But if you risk drawing another card and bust you'll take a massive 21 damage.

You can also look at your draw pile and your opponents' draw pile at any time, like the world's greatest card counter. Sometimes it provides a strong hint of your chances and other times outright confirms whether you're going to win or bust.

More interesting cards soon mix

things up. Like one that lets you steal a card from your opponent, suddenly turning their winning 21 into a pathetic 11. Or the brilliant 0.5 card that only rounds up if you're below 21 in your final score. Some of the cards are sublimely silly. I'd love to see how

long someone would survive playing blackjack in an actual casino with an SD card, a PS1 memory card, and a legally-distinct not-Pokémon card.

There's also plenty of nasty stuff for sabotaging your opponent

PACK OF JOKERS

A proudly ridiculous game then, but serious strategies do start to emerge. Chopping and changing your deck to make hitting that precious 21 easier is an obviously smart goal – filling mine with 10s and 0.5 cards is going to work someday, dammit. There's also plenty of nasty stuff for sabotaging your opponent, like a card that can burn one of their cards out of the game. Cards like this become essential against late-game opponents, something you learn through frustrating trial-and-error.

You have runs where the gambling gods smile down upon you and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Roguelike deckbuilder wherein you try to cheat at blackjack

EXPECT TO PAY
£12.80

DEVELOPER
Purple Moss Collectors

PUBLISHER
Yogscast Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen Z1 Extreme,
16GB RAM,
AMD Radeon Graphics

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
yogscast.games

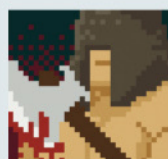
everything seems to go right. You then have runs where Satan seems to be dealing. But too often you have runs where the game just slows to a crawl. Stalemates are very possible and incredibly tedious. At one point I managed to screw myself by burning my opponent's deck until it contained only two cards: a pair of 10s. That meant they scored 20 every turn automatically, and the best I could do was chip away one damage at a time whenever I could get a perfect 21. That's an extreme example, but far from the only way to trap yourself in a miserable battle that lasts forever.

RAW DEAL

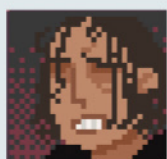
The game begins with four starter decks, each entirely one suit (hearts, spades, diamonds, or clubs), with different suits granting different bonuses when you get a 21. Hearts restore health, spades create shields, diamonds win you more chips, and clubs hit harder. Fine in theory, but because each starter deck is still the same set of basic numbers and face cards, they play near-identically until you unlock a few more cards in a run. It gets repetitive fast.

Yet, despite all that moaning, I've sunk 20 hours into it so far. True, that's because the tyrants who run PC Gamer force me to actually play the games before I review them, but I'm also going to dive back into it after my professional obligations. Because this feels a few patches away from being yet another deckbuilder great – and the developer has already got a balance update in the works to make the early going less punishing. But for now, each failed run ending with a reminder that 'The House Always Wins' (ha ha ha) feels just a little too accurate. ■

CARD SHARK *Some of the best cards to watch out for*



EXECUTIONER
Finish them quick before their damage-inflicting cards cut you down.



GAMBLER
You can meet this poor guy several times on a run. Go home, buddy!



MAD SCIENTIST
Plays all sorts of wacky status cards that'll leave you baffled.

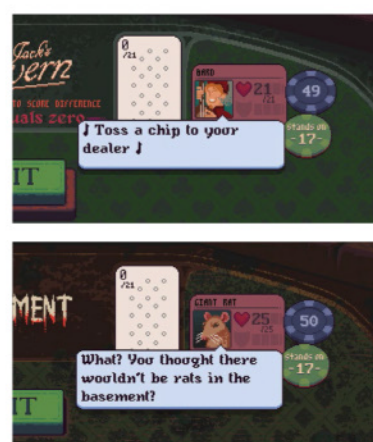
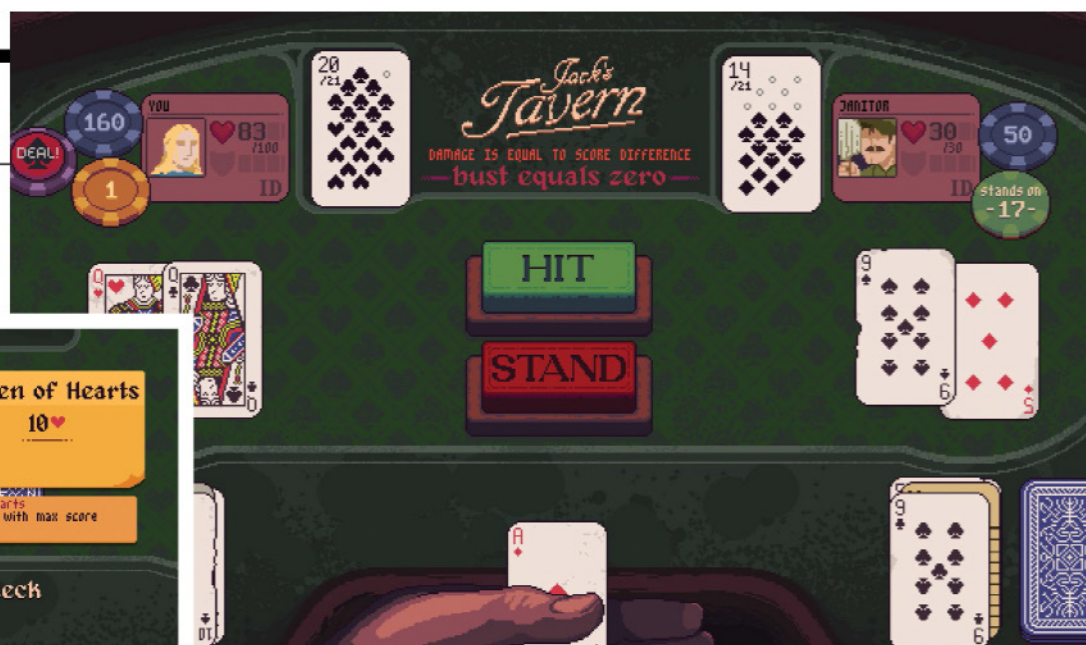


QUEEN OF DRAG
Adds a queen to your hand that's worth 11, meaning you could easily hit 21 or more.

PC GAMER VERDICT

An entertaining roguelike deckbuilder held back by irritating design decisions. Frustrating, but far from a bust.

67



FAR LEFT: Surely a janitor is easier to beat than a pro? No offence to the working man, obvs.

BELOW: Oops. Wish someone had warned me that 30 is a bigger number than 21...



STARSTRUCK

SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE 2 is the best RTS in years and a great 4X to boot

By Fraser Brown

Forgive me father, for I have sinned. A lot. *Sins of a Solar Empire 2*'s journey to launch has been an extremely confusing one. It technically left Early Access on the Epic Games Store (very quietly) a while ago, but that 1.0 version was actually missing some big things, like the final faction, and in sore need of some polish. Now it's finally arrived on Steam, though, and I have some good news: it's brilliant.

The dynamism inherent in each map is the headline attraction. *Sins 2*'s solar systems are not static maps. Planets and asteroids – collectively referred to as gravity wells, the territory in which all the game's action takes place – now move along predetermined paths. And if you don't pay attention to the movement of the heavens, you're just inviting aliens into your backyard.

In my first game, the solar system started off as an orderly chain. Each faction began surrounded by its own lattice of gravity wells waiting to be colonised and exploited, and each lattice was connected to another by a single phase lane. This allowed us all to focus on our own local area, and for a long time there was an uneasy and unofficial peace. We just ignored each other.

This was ideal, because *Sins 2* is full of complexities that need to be unpicked. A robust tutorial breaks down every mechanic and UI element, and there's a welcome amount of automation. If you try to build something that has a tech prerequisite, the game will start researching it for you. But as I pored over menus, fiddled with fleets and built up my empire's infrastructure, an hour went by – an hour in which I'd only blown up a few enemy scouts and some unaffiliated ships hanging out around the territory I had started claiming. In that time the solar system had dramatically changed.

Now, there wasn't just a single phase lane connecting me to the rest of the system – there were many

– and every one of my rivals had a clear path to my territory. And everyone else's. The peace was broken. At one point, all four of us converged upon a single planet, with

lasers and projectiles and tiny strikecraft filling the screen in a glorious spectacle. After pottering around at a leisurely pace for an hour, the cataclysmic lightshow was like a shot of adrenaline to the heart.

Celestial mechanics bless *Sins 2*'s wars with incredible texture, giving each map a unique rhythm and lively pace. As the phase lanes shift you can become unmoored from your opponents, getting some breathing

The cataclysmic lightshow was like a shot of adrenaline to the heart

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 4X-RTS hybrid full of massive space battles

EXPECT TO PAY
£42

DEVELOPER
Ironclad Games

PUBLISHER
Stardock Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900k,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
sinsofsolar
empire2.com

room before everything links up again and the map becomes engulfed in explosions and ship debris. So you switch focus, maybe start expanding in a new direction, shore up your defences, or explore the new gravity wells that have appeared. And since you can see how much the map will shift within the next hour, you can plan accordingly.

GOING FULL FERENGI

I've always been fond of *Sins*' Trader Emergency Coalition. This faction, which is split into the TEC Enclave and TEC Primacy, boasts a bunch of wealth-building features that can bolster your passive income. It's an incredibly strong feature, and by the mid-game I had a relentless economy that ensured my military might was only limited by my fleet cap.

Each of the subfactions can broadly be divided into aggressive and defensive playstyles. So the Primacy nets you a powerful long-range titan – ships so big each faction can only field one at a time – and an orbital cannon, as well as the ability to pal around with pirates and use propaganda to buff ships fighting around other gravity wells. The Enclave, meanwhile, is the only subfaction that can plonk down two starbases in a single location.

The cyber-spiritualists of the Advent Wrath enjoy one of the smoothest early games thanks to their ability to immediately colonise gravity wells adjacent to their Greater Temple of Pilgrimage after the well has been cleared of hostiles. The ravenous aliens of the Vasari Exodus, meanwhile, use labour camps and their unique ability to strip worlds of all natural resources to feed their apocalyptic war machine. It gives playthroughs with this lot a very different flavour.

One thing each faction shares, however, is that they are all built for violence. Even the Vasari Alliance, with features designed to encourage cooperation, is ultimately trying to

CLASH OF THE TITANS

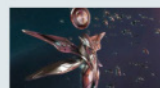
Bring out the big guns



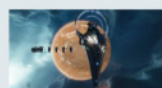
ANKYLON TITAN
The warship of the TEC Enclave is a tanky support ship that can chip away at enemy vessels.



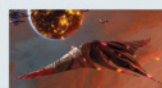
RAGNAROV TITAN
The pride of the TEC Primacy fleet is a long-range beast with a railgun.



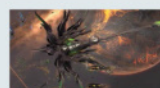
ERADICA TITAN
The Advent Reborn's titan can hold its own, but can also sacrifice friendly vessels to heal itself.



CORONATA TITAN
The Advent Wrath's mightiest vessel can turn enemies against each other.



VORASTRA TITAN
The Vasari Exodus's nimble titan is able to teleport within gravity wells.



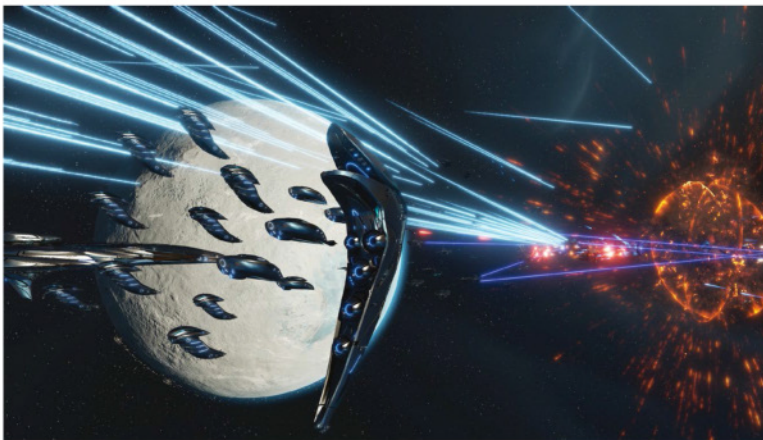
KULTORASK TITAN
The Vasari Alliance's titan uses nano-tech to either damage or heal other vessels.

The generous zoom lets you get into all the nooks and crannies.



FAR LEFT: The deadliest lightshow in the galaxy.

LEFT: Is it really sci-fi if there aren't massive neon lights everywhere?





Starbases are resilient, but that just makes their destruction so much more satisfying.



RIGHT: It looks like the reds might have it.

BELOW: When several factions collide, things can get a bit... hectic.



Want a planet-killing space cannon? Play as the TEC Primacy.



win a war. *Sins 2* leaves concepts like science victories and galactic councils to the other 4Xs. This does leave the diplomatic side of things feeling a bit perfunctory. I found the AI largely uninterested, even when I offered stupid amounts of cash and resources. It would help a lot if I had some idea of what my opponents wanted. Credits? A planet? Why won't someone be my pal?

With human players, the system is a bit more impactful thanks to the ability to actually communicate. When you're making a deal you set a specific duration, during which neither side can break the treaty. So you don't need to trust the opposition's intentions. Of course, nothing is stopping them from building up a massive fleet to attack you the moment the timer hits zero.

Minor factions can be handled with a different system, influence, which unlocks four reputation levels, each offering handy rewards. Working with these minor factions absolutely needs to be part of your strategy, and their name belies their substantial impact, but they don't have agendas or personalities. They all exist in service of this – admittedly very grand – war.

STAR DESTROYER

Sins has never been about the micro, but it would be a mistake to ignore the details. Every vessel in your huge fleet is a complex machine with size, speed, weapons and defensive capabilities that define its role and determine what you need to do to keep it alive. The ship AI is reliable enough that big-picture strategies can get you far, so you don't have to pick every target and keep repositioning them. You want some punchy front-liners, some long-range bad boys spitting out missiles, and some ships with point-defence capabilities to shoot enemy projectiles out of the sky. With those bases covered, you'll get some wins under your belt – at least on the default difficulty.

Between their shields, hulls and special abilities, most ships can take a bit of a beating, but that just lulls you into a false sense of security – look away for a second and you could lose the fight, especially in multiplayer. I almost lost my homeworld in one

game because my dog got stuck trying to get under the sofa, distracting me just long enough.

The range of role-specific ships, tech upgrades and ship items means there's an abundance of fleet customisation, without the need for a ship designer. And honestly, that's ideal. Select the right things and you

can create unstoppable juggernauts with nigh-impenetrable hulls that constantly repair themselves; mobile, planet-killing warhead factories; and absolute beasts that murder everything in their vicinity.

Sins 2 also approaches space combat as a tangible, physical event, simulating projectiles and actually taking into account what's sitting between them and their target. This means you can use your big lads, like your titan, as a literal shield, blocking enemy salvos. Obviously you don't want to sacrifice your titan, so you won't be wanting to use it as a shield all the time, but that's why you should field things like flak frigates, which use their turrets to knock out projectiles and strike craft.

Despite the absence of a campaign or discrete objectives, the individual

fighters and larger wars still spit out their fair share of novelties. A game on a small, resource-scarce map where every agile ship is precious is a uniquely different proposition to one with multiple solar systems, in which each faction begins safely nestled away in its own corner, able to slowly expand and build massive armadas before finally saying 'howdy' with a wall of warheads. And then human opponents throw in another wrinkle.

JOIN THE FLEET

When it comes to 4Xs, I'm more of a singleplayer guy, but *Sins 2*'s RTS DNA makes human-on-human violence more attractive, buoyed by features like AI hotseat and AI takeover, which lets players dip in and out, time-locked alliances, optional infinite pauses and replays that immortalise your greatest victories and most embarrassing failures. All the boxes have been ticked, so I'm hopeful that it's going to be able to secure a long-term future of infinite multiplayer wars.

It would be a sin to end this review without mentioning how much eye candy these cosmic conflicts provide. *Sins 2* is a kaleidoscope of deadly lasers and colourful space hulks, elevated by absurdly minuscule details and appropriately dramatic lighting. And while it's not the first game to play with scale like this, it's still so impressive to seamlessly switch from looking at a map of one or more solar systems to being able to pick out individual lights on a ship, rust on a hull or a missile zeroing in on its unfortunate target.

The RTS has been making a comeback over these last few years, but there have been far more stumbles than successes. My time with *Sins of a Solar Empire 2*, though, has been plain sailing, from the performance – which I never noticed dipping below 70fps with everything cranked up – to the new features like celestial mechanics. I'd love to see more meat added to the 4X layer, with deeper diplomacy and some narrative colour, but when it comes to pure war, nobody does it better. ■

THE SINNERS

Faction roll call



TEC PRIMACY
Militant traders who spout propaganda and demolish fleets with their offensive powerhouse titan.



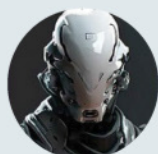
ADVENT REBORN
Spiritual cyborgs who can resurrect ships and sacrifice worlds to harm nearby enemies.



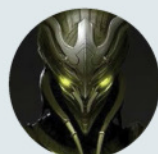
VASARI EXODUS
Planet-consuming aliens who are masters at gobbling up resources to fuel the relentless war.



TEC ENCLAVE
Economy-minded turtlers who can put an extra starbase in every gravity well they control.



ADVENT WRATH
Puppet masters who can control enemy ships, buff allies and rapidly colonise gravity wells.



VASARI ALLIANCE
Silver-tongued aliens keen to collaborate with other factions.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Ironclad's impressive interstellar 4X sequel *Sins of a Solar Empire 2* has made me proud to be a sinner.

87

GODS AND MONSTERS

AGE OF MYTHOLOGY: RETOLD modernises a classic RTS with care

By Phil Iwaniuk

How are the mighty fallen. RTS was the beating heart of PC gaming once, now surviving on the platform's periphery as indies, remakes and remasters. Enter *Age of Mythology Retold*, not a 100% faithful translation of the 2002 original but, as the name indicates, a modern interpretation.

This is a particularly tricky kind of alchemy to pull off, and although there are some tonal mis-steps such as the voice acting it largely succeeds in knowing when to stick and when to twist.

For anyone who didn't play the original: It's more or less *Age of Empires* set in mythical eras, where powerful hero units and mythological beasts fight alongside conventional military units. Friendlier and slower-paced than *Starcraft's* ruthlessly aggressive take on RTS, but built around the usual rock-paper-scissors game of unit strengths and weaknesses. Victory is wrought by finding the right army composition and using your limited resources – food, wood, gold and favour – to materialise it.

For fans of the original, these are the most significant changes: a UI and visual overhaul occupies the headline billing since it's the most noticeable element, and it feels in-touch with the original's visual components without being overly married to them. UI layout is logical and clean, and the game worlds hit your eye with impressive detail.

The new 'attack move' command saves on a lot of micromanagement, telling your selected units to attack everything on the way to a marker. You still need to consider placement though, and send in the right kind of units at the right moment when you're going up against heavily fortified bases or enemy armies busting with hero units and mythical beasts. Occasionally, units go for an unsanctioned wander off into nothingness, but *Retold* feels like a

big upgrade on the original's often baffling pathfinding.

HIT AND MYTH

Onto God powers. No longer one-shot, game-changing cataclysms, they now operate on cooldown

timers and can be deployed more than once per round. I can't decide whether that feels more or less strategic – the gravity of deciding when to use a powerful one-shot is offset by the depth of timing

one just right so that you'll get it at a useful moment later.

All of which is terribly crucial if you're already familiar with the game inside-out before *Retold* arrives, but if you're not, what's the sell here? Truthfully, the slower pace and the combination of historic and mythological units makes for a relaxing, therapeutic RTS session. The Greeks, Egyptians, Norse and Atlanteans play differently enough to take some pleasure from mastery of each, and although it's an odd

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A modern re-imagining of that RTS with all the Minotaurs.

EXPECT TO PAY
£23

DEVELOPER
World's Edge, Forgotten Empires, Tantalus Media, CaptureAge, Virtuos Games

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/1934680/Age_of_Mythology_Retold/

business decision that the Chinese – added as DLC after the original's release – don't feature at release, they are at least being added in *Retold's* first DLC.

There have been concerns over the character portraits in *Retold*, and speculation that the devs used AI to generate them – an accusation that the devs squarely denied, stating clearly that they're drawn by human artists. The problem to my eye isn't who drew them, it's that they lack charm. People get understandably attached to assets like this in classic games, so the bar's high when you're updating them. They lack some personality, nothing more.

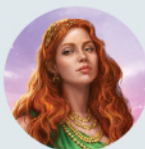
The same's probably true of the voice-acting. It's probably just a minor issue. Probably. Cutscenes are not the game, they just bookend it, but the performances are a rogue's gallery of slightly off accents, and that does detract from the drama and immersion. I found myself feeling more harshly towards this one point as I got deeper through the campaigns, but we should all probably remember that bad cutscene performances are basically mandatory in real-time strategy. The great Tim Curry taught us that.

Some will hate that it isn't identical to the original, as always seems to be the case with remakes and remasters. Likely more will lament a lack of personality from its new presentation elements. But what most will agree on is that watching a swarm of Ancient Greek soldiers flanked by Minotaurs lay siege to the walls of Troy is just as decent a way to spend an afternoon in 2024 as it was in 2002. Given RTS's tenuous spot in modern PC gaming, that's an important win. ■

Bad cutscene performances are basically mandatory in RTS games

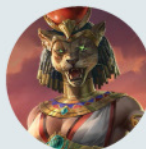
OH HAPPY DEUS

Three of the most entertaining deities



APHRODITE

The goddess of love's AoE ability turns soldiers into pigs. Fear her.



SEKHMET

Not your average dreadlocked cat. Spawns beetles as siege weapons.



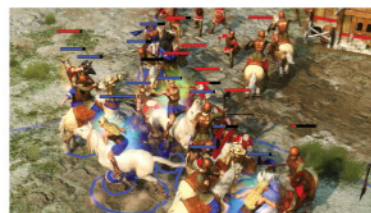
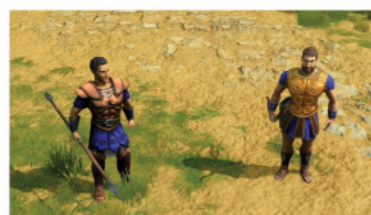
FREYJA

Her ability is literally a massive forest fire. Devastating to enemy resources.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Old-school strategy, sensibly modernised. Creaky cutscenes and art aside, the visual overhaul works wonders.

75



FAR LEFT: Release the kraken! (if you're Norse and worship the right god).

LEFT: King Folstag of the Frost Giants is the most Viking Viking to ever Viking. Check out that helmet.

BELOW: Hello, I'm a giant pig. Where's my copy of PC Gamer magazine?



LEVELED UP

A new era for the 20-year-old MMO in **WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE WAR WITHIN**

By Tyler Colp

A Tauren paladin rattled up on his mount right in the middle of one of *World of Warcraft: The War Within's* final quests. It would've been nice to see a sweet conversation between two major characters, but the scene was interrupted. It wouldn't have bothered me normally, except there are glimmers of an older *WoW* here, one where I actually care about its story and which I thought we'd left behind.

World of Warcraft: The War Within is an expansion that thrives off of its characters and their tender interactions. Missing even a second of a conversation to another player passing by reminded me that, oh right, I'm playing a 20-year-old MMO, and the other half of it is all about funnelling you into a routine that makes numbers go up. No matter how much *WoW* has revitalised its storytelling, it's still a game mired by the perpetual grind it's become.

I've only dabbled in *WoW* since spending most of my teenage years going on 25-player raids when I should've been studying, and *The War Within* is Blizzard's call for people like me to return, to 'come home,' and it only took me a few hours of readjusting to see why. Actual storytelling, not a series of Marvel movie catastrophes, is

important again; characters are important again; worldbuilding is important again. The effort started by the last expansion, *Dragonflight*, has paid off: *The War Within* is

easily *WoW's* best campaign. The catch, however, is that the moment you finish it, you're kicked back out into the morass of all the things that pushed me away from *WoW* in the first place.

My first hint

was the barrage of quests and notifications that flashed across my screen when I logged in. Years of systems begging for attention all at once. I thought gacha games were bad at overwhelming you with menus to click through, but trying to start *The War Within* had me wondering if *WoW* needs an adblocker. Eventually I made it to Dalaran, the floating city where the story begins. No, wait, I was in the other Dalaran, the floating

It's been a long time since *WoW* has stunned me by its sheer scale

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

The 10th expansion to a fantasy MMORPG in the *Warcraft* universe.

EXPECT TO PAY

£50

DEVELOPER

Blizzard

PUBLISHER

Blizzard

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i9-12900K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

worldofwarcraft.blizzard.com/en-us

city that looks like the one where the story begins but is actually from a different era of *WoW*. The mirror version exists for levelling reasons, and for wasting my time reasons, it felt like, as I searched for the start of the campaign that kicks off by blowing the new one up.

While you start in the bucolic home of the Earthen, a race of stone dwarfs handmade by the Titan gods of *Warcraft*, it's the areas underneath the planet Azeroth's surface that might actually compete with some of the MMO's most iconic locations. Each one is deeper into the earth than the one before it, a nesting doll of colossal environments that never once feel dulled by the lack of sunlight. It's been a long time since *WoW* has stunned me by its sheer scale, but *The War Within* pulls it off repeatedly.

A quest at the end of the storyline in the campaign's second zone, the Ringing Deepes, sent me flying through a twisting ravine. I expected to find a camp or nest of enemies to kill, but it just kept going and going while the music faded out. I rounded a corner and realised I had just stumbled into the entrance to an entirely separate area, like I was playing *Elden Ring*. The ravine gave way to a cliff lit by the golden rays of a massive crystal jutting out of the ceiling. In Hallowfall, the crystal (or alien creature?) is the only source of light and when it goes dark so does everything else.

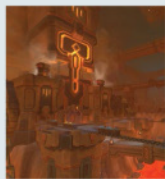
Time and an abundance of lore has robbed the magic from *WoW's* most mysterious zones, but very little is explained about the nature of Hallowfall's crystal as you help the local Arathi soldiers fend off Xal'atath's bug army. And I hope it stays that way because the crystal also acts as a symbol for new character Faerin's allegiance to the Light, one of *Warcraft's* cosmic-forces-turned-religion. I kept waiting for a big reveal to eclipse the series of quests that let you listen as her

BIGGER WORLD

A survey of *The War Within's* new zones



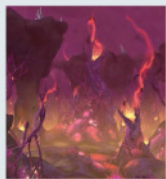
ISLE OF DORN
This is the most classic-feeling zone and it's probably because it's also the home of the Earthen.



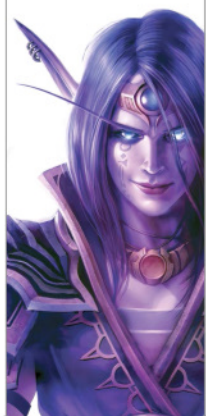
RINGING DEEPS
This is a massive industrial cavern with pockets of lava and iron structures that's under Dorn.



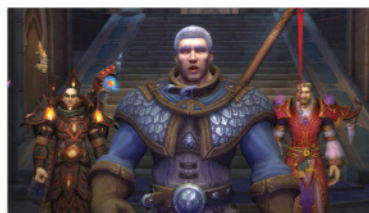
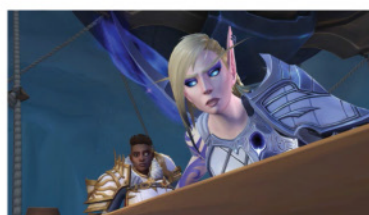
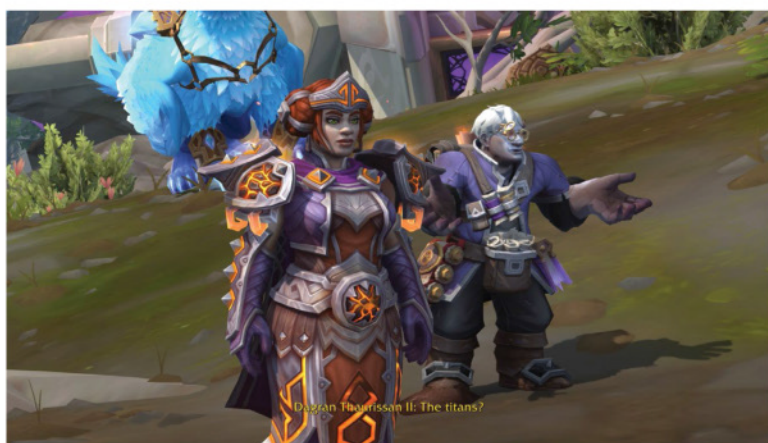
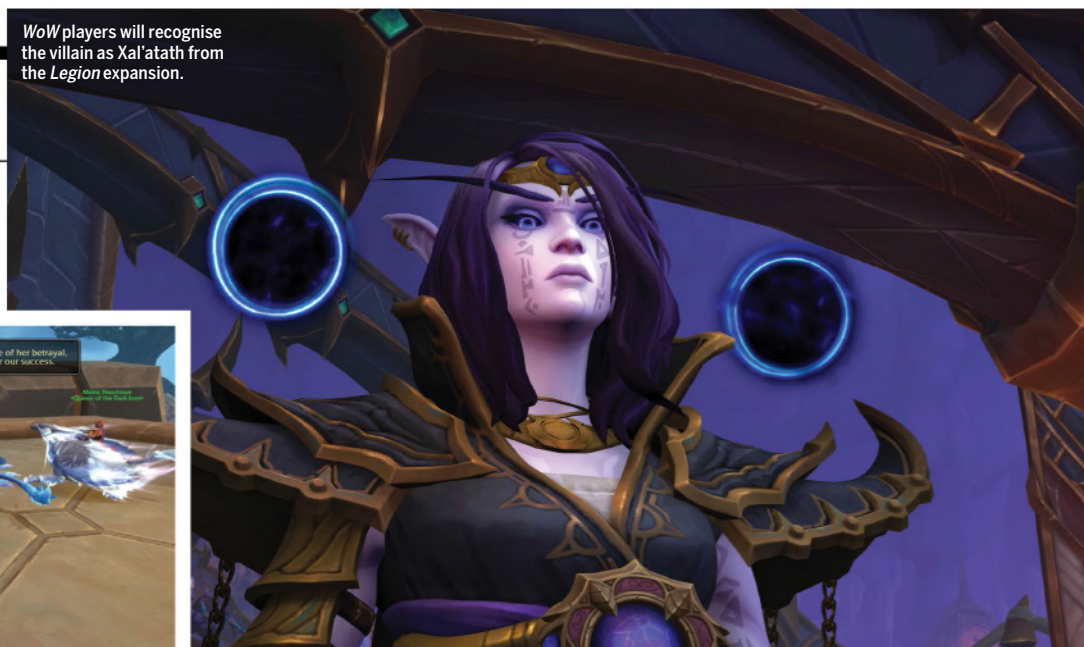
HALLOWFALL
A subterranean zone lit by a mysterious crystal that can glow with golden brilliance in the daytime.



AZJ-KAHET
Below Hallowfall is the capital of *Warcraft's* spider-like Nerubians, and its scale is enormous.



WoW players will recognise the villain as Xal'atath from the Legion expansion.



LEFT: The campaign is stuffed with impressive cutscenes.

BELOW: Despite being underground, every zone is beautiful.





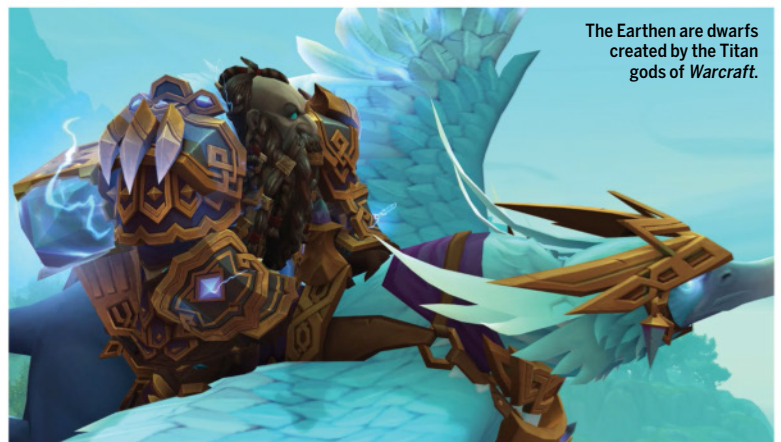
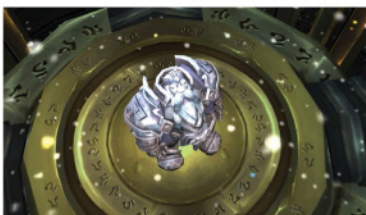
New character
Faerin is a delight.

Faerin Lothar: But the Light always returns.



RIGHT: The story kicks off with a shocking moment in the planet Azeroth's core.

BELOW: Delves are mini dungeons with unique hazards to work around.



The Earthen are dwarves created by the Titan gods of Warcraft.



resolve starts to heal Anduin, the leader of the Alliance who was broken by the events of the *Shadowlands* expansion. Just two expansions ago, the crystal would've been a raid boss, and it's the best example of how *The War Within* centres its story around characters rather than cosmic forces for us to defeat.

An early side quest in Isle of Dorn has you helping out an Earthen who is preparing for his final days but is starting to lose his memory. The quest begins with a little bit of combat as you clear vandalising kobolds out of a cemetery, but slows down as you learn about Earthen traditions and why, after decades of isolation, some might want to peek at the world they never got to see. There are countless tragic quests in *WoW*'s history, but few of them are as well written and paced as this one, setting your character to the side as you do your best to help fulfil someone's last wish.

LOOKING FOR MORE

That reduction in scope extends less successfully to *The War Within*'s newest dungeon alternative: Delves. Instead of a big multi-boss adventure, Delves are 20-minute mini-dungeons that you can do solo or with a small group. I was surprised when I finished the campaign without ever being directed to them, but after trying several of them out, that might've been a good thing.

Delves are *Diablo*-like dungeons full of enemies and tedious objectives in a game with combat that isn't anywhere as satisfying for a solo player as it is in an action RPG. I took

my warlock into an Earthen forge where I had to break open vents to cool down from the heat burning my life away. I crawled through hallway after hallway pulling enemies one at a time to avoid losing too many stacks of the protective buff before I could replenish it at another vent. It was a gruelling experience that rewarded

me with some forgettable loot that I could've earned much faster from a quest.

Later on, I pushed the difficulty up a few tiers and tried a Delve with creeping darkness that turned out to be almost the exact

same mechanic as the one in the forge. I fought even harder enemies – who were therefore slower to kill – with Brann Bronzebeard by my side, casting heals on me and refusing to move out of explosions. I'm sure things would go faster with a proper group of players, but nothing about Delves convinced me that the time wouldn't be better spent doing literally anything else, like a normal dungeon.

The intent is for Delves to serve as a way for solo players to earn powerful gear without having to run dungeons. On paper, that's a compelling idea that could at least add variety to how you gear up in *WoW*'s endgame. But Delves, when compared to the relative ease of *WoW*'s modern dungeons, are a chore I'd rather skip. That said, with some boosts to the pacing and rewards, I think Blizzard could massage them into a fun side activity in future patches.

ENDGAME TROUBLES

Delves live in the staggering gap between *The War Within*'s campaign

and *WoW*'s modern endgame, the treadmill of progression that opens up once you've finished the story quests. The first season and its raid aren't available yet, but I can already tell grinding through daily world quests and dungeons isn't for me.

After playing through the campaign, where quest objectives would vary from defending a base or helping to heal wounded Earthen, world quests have reminded me how empty *WoW* can be if you're a seasonal player chasing after better loot. The old joke about killing seven wolves for a quest is the entire point of world quests: mostly contextless objectives that feed you loot or currency to upgrade your gear. Maybe if gear actually felt like it had an impact on my damage in a game where every enemy scales with you, I'd enjoy climbing the ladder toward harder dungeons and raids. But world quests just made me miss playing hide and seek with children and walking with an Arathi commander as she told me about life in Hallowfall during the campaign, where my character's power really didn't matter at all.

All I wanted to do was go right back to questing in the pretty new areas without having to think about what stat is best for me and what my opening spell rotation should be. And thanks to the way *WoW* separates its main story quests from its side quests, I absolutely can. They may not be as consistently good as the ones in the campaign, but the side quests are a great excuse to spend more time just living in *The War Within*'s excellent new zones.

Even if I can't see myself logging into *WoW* every day, *The War Within*'s campaign satisfied the urge to get lost in Blizzard's big fantasy world again. The story will continue as major updates happen and that might be enough to keep me hanging on until the end of the trilogy. But anything past that is a bottomless chasm that I'm happy to skip over, unless Blizzard finds a way to blend its powerful storytelling with a grind that doesn't drain the joy out of its world. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The latest *WoW* expansion brings a huge improvement in storytelling alongside a joyless grind.

80

All I wanted to do was go back to questing in the pretty new areas

EVIL ELF Who exactly is Xal'atath?

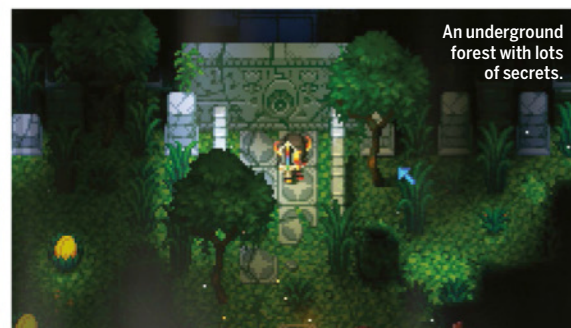
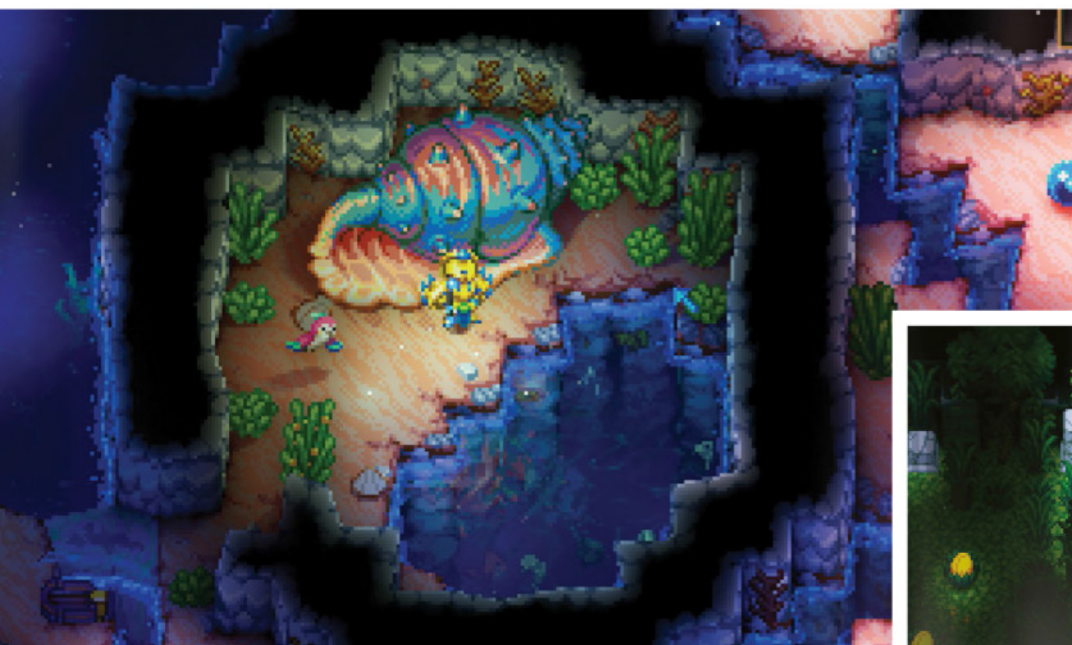
1 Although priest players met her during the *Legion* expansion, she was around when the planet was born.

2 She's aligned with the void, which in *Warcraft* isn't necessarily evil but a counter to the Light.



3 Technically this isn't even what she looks like; it's the face of an elf she kills and possesses.

4 It's not pictured here, but she holds a powerful artefact called the Dark Heart that can destroy cities.

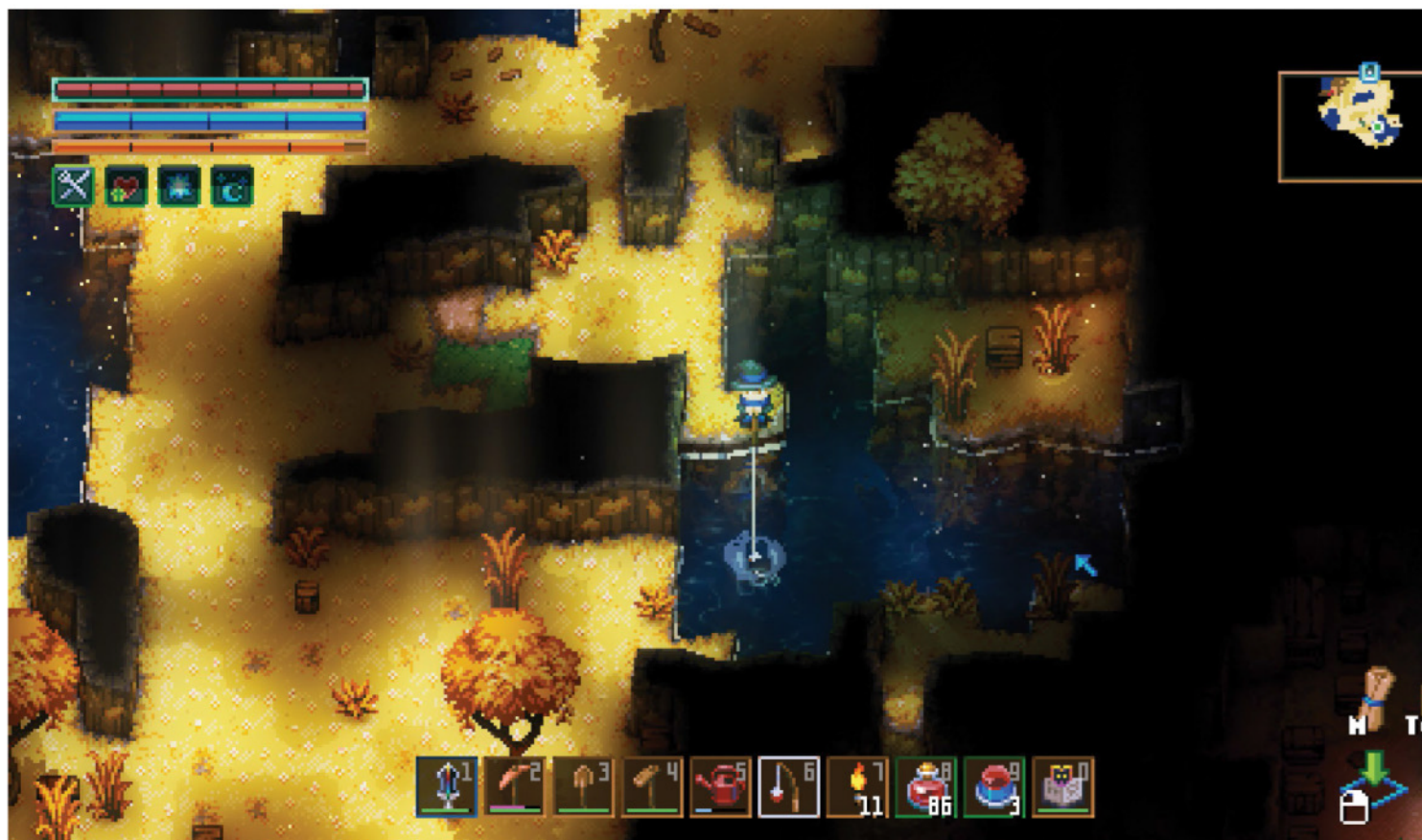
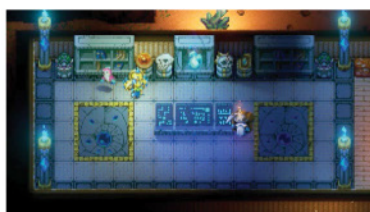
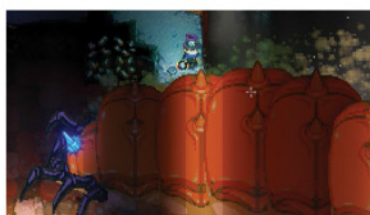


An underground forest with lots of secrets.

ABOVE: I don't want to meet the critter that lives in this shell.

FAR RIGHT: There are tons of beautiful sights to witness.

BELOW: A spot of fishin' can help you relax.



DIG IT

Minecraft meets Valheim in top-down survival crafting sandbox **CORE KEEPER**

By Christopher Livingston

Iwish I'd kept track of how often I said, "What the heck is that?" while playing *Core Keeper*. It must have happened a dozen times in the first dozen hours alone, like when I came across a conch shell the size of a school bus or stumbled upon a subterranean castle 20 times the size of my base. And let's not forget when a caterpillar as big as a passenger train came stampeding through the tunnel I was exploring. WTF?

Core Keeper's got a lot in common with survival games like *Valheim*, plus plenty of *Minecraft* DNA, and even a smidge of *Stardew Valley*: bizarre sights, unexpected encounters, and

delightful (though dangerous) surprises are just a few things I want from a procedurally generated co-op survival crafting sandbox, and those aren't the only important items *Core*

Keeper checks off my list. Colourful and cute as its pixelated world is, it's still daunting and scary at times – yet despite all its dangers and some seriously powerful bosses, it also makes for a cosy and comfy base-building experience. Plus: it's got fishing. No wonder I've sunk more than 60 hours into it.

In *Core Keeper* you (or your friends, since it supports up to eight players) find yourself stranded underground in a dimly lit cave filled with ancient and defunct technology. Awaken the slumbering core means finding a way to power it up, so pick a direction and just start digging. Chip away at dirt walls, harvest the materials you find, craft new weapons and gear, build a base and dig far-reaching tunnels outward from the core to other biomes, which include clay caverns, arid deserts, and even a vast blue ocean.

MINE CRAFTING

Progress is pretty familiar if you've played some survivalcraft before: mine early resources like copper and smelt the ore into ingots to make better tools, armour and weapons,

then dig deeper into the world to find sturdier stuff like tin, gold and iron. But it's not all about whacking walls with a pick: one of the joys of *Core Keeper* is setting up resource

production lines so you can get machinery to do the grunt work for you, setting up mining operations with drills, conveyor belts, and robotic arms to harvest, collect, and transport the resources you need.

There's also plenty of enjoyable details in the enemies you face, especially the Cavelings. At first they just seemed like mindlessly hostile monsters, but sometimes I

come across one chipping away at a wall, mining for ores just like I do. I've seen several of them sleeping, because even monsters need a rest. In other biomes I've even seen them growing crops on little farms. These are enjoyable little details and occasionally make me wonder if maybe I'm the monster for invading their territory in search of loot.

As far as progression goes, there's a bit of shared DNA with *Valheim*'s boss system. A few of *Core Keeper*'s bosses are already stomping around in the world – there are even several who travel around the map – but others need to be summoned by crafting a specific item. That makes defeating them easier, because you can set up the boss chamber with traps and be as prepared as possible before the fight begins. It doesn't always help: *Core Keeper*'s bosses are surprisingly tough, and most of them took me numerous tries and strategies before I defeated them.

For a game that takes place underground, *Core Keeper* does a great job of making you forget you're buried. In the early game there's darkness on all sides, banished only by placing torches or hollowing out huge caverns, but there are several biomes like the wilderness, desert and ocean that give you the feel of being outside in the warm sunlight.

It's been a while since I got so drawn in by a co-op survival game, but *Core Keeper* hooked me twice: once when it first entered Early Access in 2022, and then again when version 1.0 launched in August. It's got so much of what I enjoy in a survival experience: a big world packed with danger that's exciting to explore, and a warm cosy base to come home to when I'm done. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A subterranean mining and crafting sandbox

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Pugstorm

PUBLISHER
Fireshine Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7-9700K, RTX 4070 Ti, 16GB RAM

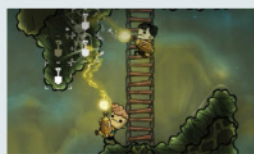
MULTIPLAYER
8 player co-op

LINK
fireshinegames.co.uk/games/core-keeper

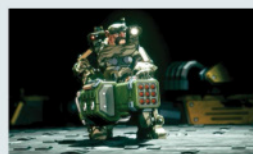
Maybe I'm the monster for invading their territory in search of loot

GOING DEEP

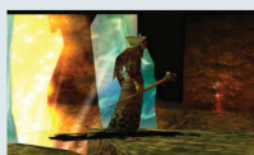
More great underground games



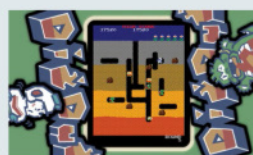
OXYGEN NOT INCLUDED
Keep your crew alive deep inside an asteroid colony in this cartoony survival sim.



DEEP ROCK GALACTIC
Even in space, dwarves still love being underground. Mine asteroids while battling aliens.



DUNGEON KEEPER
Construct a deadly and elaborate dungeon to protect your evil empire from the forces of good.



DIG DUG
Went way back in time for this one. Dig deep and inflate monsters with a bicycle pump.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Pugstorm's *Core Keeper* is a sprawling survival game in a beautiful subterranean world. You should give it a go

86

SPACED OUT

After a strong first impression, **WARHAMMER 40K: SPACE MARINE 2** runs out of steam

By Robin Valentine

Over the course of its roughly eight-hour story campaign, *Space Marine 2* presents the Warhammer 40,000 setting at a whole new level of spectacle. It feels huge, authentic, and visually sumptuous – the kind of proper, grown-up, big-budget experience fans of the tabletop game have been dreaming of for years. But the sad truth is that I was tired of actually playing it before those eight hours were even up.

It's disappointing, because the game does make a fantastic first impression. As Space Marine warrior Lieutenant Titus, returning from the first game, you're dropped straight into a war against the insectile tyranids, and it's simply awe-inspiring looking out at the horizon and seeing their forces crawling over an entire mega-city. Saber Interactive's swarm tech, already perfected in otherwise limp co-op shooter *World War Z*, is used to wonderful effect to sell the vast scale of the war.

Hyper-gothic architecture towers over you, and as a genetically-modified, power-armoured super-soldier, you tower over the normal humans who scurry around your feet. Like the first game, *Space Marine 2* understands that the warriors of the Imperium need to feel massive,

weighty, and powerful, far beyond your usual bulky sci-fi protagonist.

In combat you're a force of nature, raining down explosive hell on tides of enemies before drawing a combat

knife as long as a man and crashing into melee like a furious steam train. Larger elite enemies striding through the flood, such as grinning, chitinous tyranid warriors, are your priority targets.

You ram through the crowd to reach them for melee duels, parrying their blows and smashing at their defences until they stand woozy and stunned, ready for an execution animation that restores your shield bar and sees them ripped to gory pieces and frequently stabbed to death with their own appendages.

For your first couple of hours of fights, it looks and feels awesome, but unfortunately it's not long before

The warriors of the Imperium need to feel massive and powerful

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A bombastic third-person shooter/brawler set in the Warhammer 40,000 universe.

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
Saber Interactive

PUBLISHER
Focus Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
focus-entmt.com/en/games/warhammer-40000-space-marine-2%20

cracks start to show. The biggest problem is the executions. Other than the swarming minions, every enemy will enter that stunned state once they're at low enough health, and as executions are one of your only ways to mitigate damage, it's always to your advantage to perform them. The result is that you're constantly sprinting between flashing red foes to watch the same canned animations over and over, a problem that only escalates as the game sends out increasing numbers of elite troops.

ONLY WAR

The whole system of combat is warped around this one mechanic. Long-range combat becomes largely pointless, despite the array of scoped weapons that cater for it. But equally the various close-range guns have little use either, because at that range you might as well just draw your melee weapon, and their lack of versatility will leave you caught out against certain enemy types. The sensible choice is always simply your standard, mid-range boltgun. That's not ideal in a game that already struggles to offer variety in its combat encounters that far too often simply see you fighting the same small number of enemy types.

Other mechanics, such as parries and counter-attacks, are layered onto this core framework, but the result is messy. There are individual elements that work well – Titus feels huge without being slow or unresponsive, iconic Warhammer 40,000 weapons such as the thunder hammer are as impactful and empowering as they should be, and there's a great gory sense of humour to the animations. But it doesn't add up to a coherent vision, and the charm of the parts that do work is tarnished more and more by repetition and frustration.

THE IMPERIAL TRUTH

What does shine through is how passionate and knowledgeable about this setting Saber Interactive is.

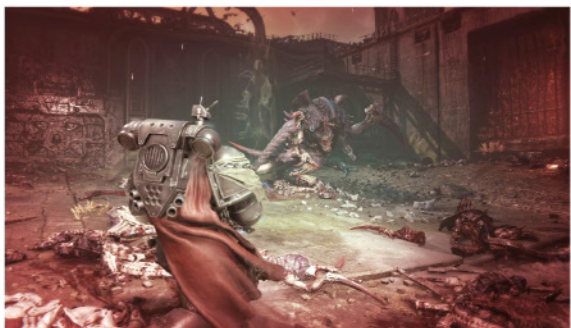
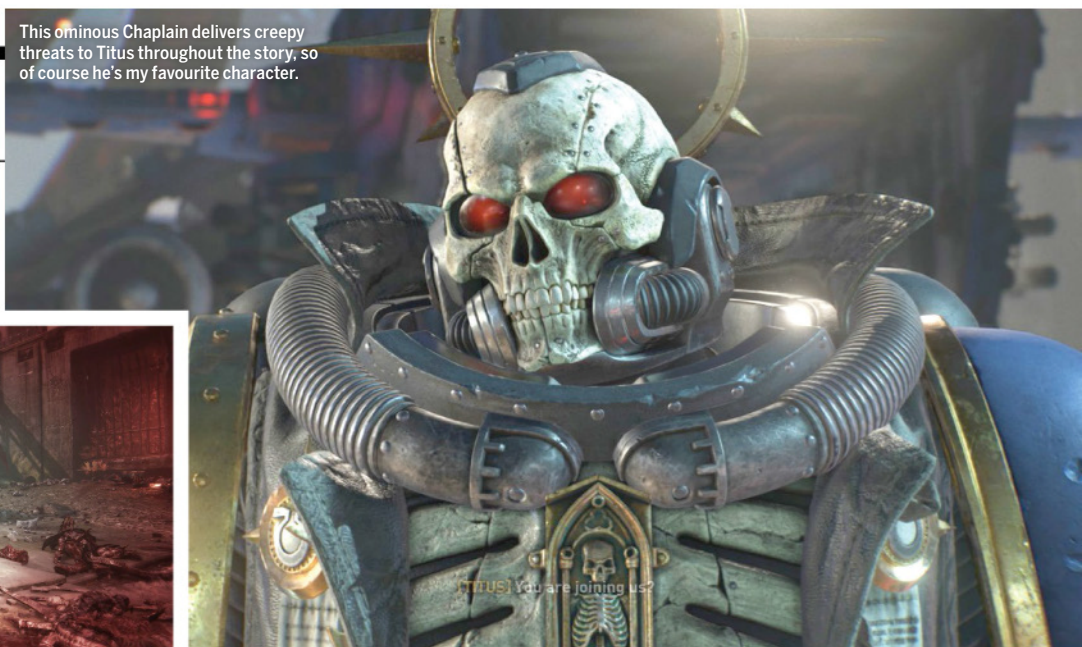
BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

A look at *Space Marine 2*'s PvP mode

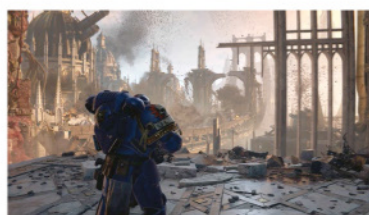


The game's third pillar, a competitive mode called Eternal War, wasn't playable during the pre-launch period. I've since gotten to give it a try, but to be honest I've found it the most disappointing of the three modes. It's a very basic PvP offering with boxy maps and three simple mission types. To allow for quick kills, the durability of your marine is dialled way down, which makes them feel paper-thin, and though it lets you play as a Chaos Space Marine, their implementation is full of lore inaccuracies – surprising given how authentic to Warhammer the rest of the game is.

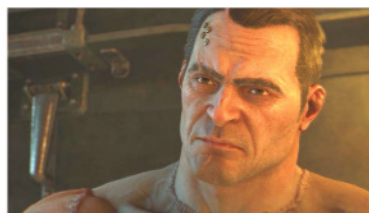
This ominous Chaplain delivers creepy threats to Titus throughout the story, so of course he's my favourite character.



Marine knife
against tyranid
bone sword



FAR LEFT: In both campaign mode and co-op, tyranids are much more fun to fight than the forces of Chaos.

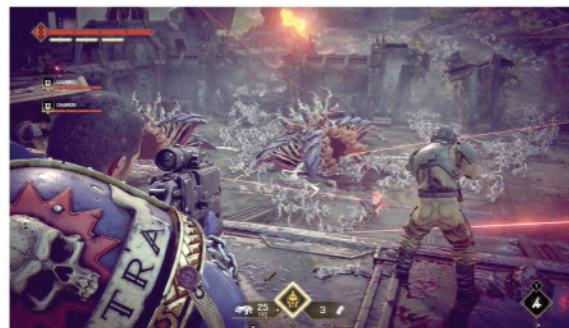


BELOW: The visuals punch far above their weight, and several set-pieces are truly breathtaking.





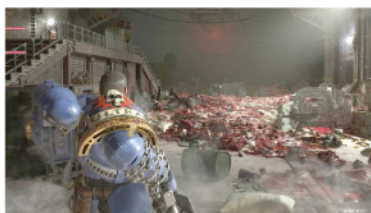
I was surprised how much screentime the wonderfully weird tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus receive.



RIGHT: Main villain Imurah is one of those "This was my plan all along!" kind of guys, but his grand scheme doesn't make much sense.



BELOW: The game's impressive swarm tech gives battles an amazing sense of scale.



KADAKU

ASTRA MILITARUM OUTPOST
DAY 4, 05:47:02

Look how little that normal human is.

Though the story is fairly thin (essentially Titus is just in the middle of a big war trying to prevent the use of a dangerous macguffin) it nails both the broad strokes of how Warhammer 40,000 should feel, and its quieter, more nuanced elements.

More often than not, videogames in this setting tell stories of heroic Imperials fighting against the forces of pure evil. So it was a pleasant surprise to see this game incorporate themes such as the simmering tension between the Space Marines and the Adeptus Mechanicus, or the ways the awkward bureaucracy and superstition of the Imperium hamper the war effort.

In some ways it's authentic to a fault, even – it's likely to be too in-depth for more casual Warhammer fans, or those unfamiliar with the universe. But for dedicated Warhammer 40,000 aficionados there's a real thrill in such a major game not only representing the setting so well but refusing to compromise on it for a mainstream audience. *Space Marine 2* revels in the specifics of Games Workshop's universe in a way I think very few games ever have, and that's something the community is sure to take to heart even if the overall experience is flawed.

But while that atmosphere and authenticity never breaks, like the combat the story increasingly loses its way as the game goes on. It has an odd structure – by the end of the second act, any intrigue and mystery in the plot has been fully resolved already, and the character arcs of your companions have concluded. (Titus himself doesn't have an arc – he's just always right, and spends the game stoically waiting for everyone else to realise.) That leaves the third act with nothing to do but try and escalate all the fighting and shouting and apocalyptic threats ever higher and higher, and though the visuals are mostly impressive enough to back it up, it does all start to feel like so much noise.

It's not helped by an increasing shift in focus over the course of the game from the tyrannids to the forces of Chaos – specifically the Thousand Sons, worshippers of the god of magic and scheming, Tzeentch.

They're disappointingly two-dimensional villains whose plans feel underbaked – and worse, they're just much less fun to fight than the tyrannids. Just as the combat is most wearing out its welcome, the game goes all-in on much less satisfying enemies.

It nails the broad strokes of how Warhammer 40K should feel

SQUAD GAME

Throughout the campaign, Titus sends another small team out to complete vital objectives that intersect with his own. This is your cue to hop over into the separate but narratively interwoven

co-op mode, where you can play out these missions with up to two friends as one of six different Space Marine classes. While in the story Titus is battling to reach the astropaths to send a message off-world, for example, you can play out the effort to destroy signal jammers around the area, or perform the assassination of a hive tyrant that clears the way for him to get there.

It's an interesting idea, and does add some extra drama to the six co-op missions. There is fun to be had, too, in the sheer chaos of three player-controlled marines crashing around taking on even greater numbers of foes, and at least the mission objectives that feel contrived

in singleplayer fit more neatly in multiplayer. There's no less attention to detail in the visuals and set-pieces, either – there are moments in co-op that feel as spectacular and must-see as anything in the campaign.

After playing each of the six missions for the first time, however, I already felt I'd essentially seen everything co-op has to offer. Those problems with the combat system are even more pronounced in a mode that pushes you to test your skills (and includes two people ready to steal your executions), and compared to the Warhammer co-op elephant-in-the-room *Darktide* there just isn't the depth here to dig into over a long period of time, either in the action or in the very linear levelling.

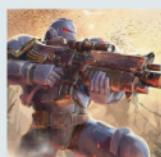
Following the fairly short story campaign, I was hoping the co-op would make *Space Marine 2* a more complete package, but it feels just as fire-and-forget – worth trying for its cool, cinematic moments and the initial rush of the action, but wearing out its welcome a while before its roughly five hours of content is up. Future updates will add more to do and may smooth off some of the rough edges, but I'll be surprised if they can improve the core systems and mission design enough to give it the depth it needs for long-term play.

Despite my misgivings, there are moments in *Space Marine 2* that I think every fan of Warhammer 40,000 owes it to themselves to see. It's rough and uneven, but still operating on a grander scale and level of production value than we've ever seen from the setting before. It puts me in the odd position of feeling that this is fundamentally not a good game, but one that I think will still be a great source of joy for its audience.

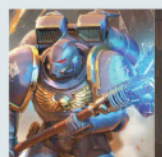
As a few hours of seeing cool stuff, feeling big, and nerding out before it runs out of steam, *Space Marine 2* is a decent bit of fun. But at full price, I think you'd expect a bit more than that. I commend Saber Interactive for its clearly genuine and deep love for Warhammer 40,000, but though it has done right by the setting, I wish as much care had been put into the parts I actually get to control. ■

MARINE BIOLOGY

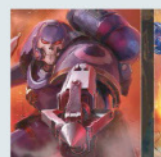
The six classes of Space Marine 2's co-op



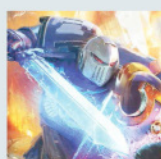
TACTICAL
Your reliable all-rounder with a boltgun.



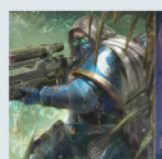
ASSAULT
Jump pack-equipped specialists leap into close combat.



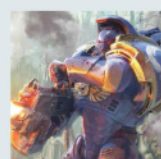
VANGUARD
Versatile and quick – can grapple-hook foes to finish them.



BULWARK
Melee-focused tanks bearing huge shields.



SNIPER
Master of scoped weapons, dangerous at a distance.



HEAVY
Brings the biggest guns, but has no melee weapon.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Severe diminishing returns tarnish what should be Warhammer 40,000's grandest outing on PC yet.

60

SWORN ALLIES

WILD BASTARDS brilliantly combines whip-fast shootouts with cowboy management

By Jeremy Peel

It's dusk in a one-horse town, and that one horse is Sarge, a bipedal stallion carrying a lever rifle. As he scans the street for targets, a sniper wearing a monocle breaks the silence. "What precisely are you s'posed to be?", he yells in a clipped English accent. The jibe gives away the hunter's location in the dark – behind the belltower, up on the church roof. Sarge closes the distance in seconds. Even on two legs, he gallops faster than any human.

Moments after that, the showdown is over. Up on the tactical map, Sarge is cantering off to his next encounter. This is the one-two punch of *Wild Bastards* – part FPS, part strategy game with the DNA of *XCOM*.

Sarge belongs to a gaggle of outlaws, hunted to the point of extinction by the bigoted magnate Jebediah Chaste. Thankfully, a legendary and enigmatic starship named the Drifter swoops in to save them. Nestled in its metallic bosom, you set out across the stars to find and resurrect the rest of the gang. Every sector of space you enter is like a roguelike run, in which you navigate between nodes representing shipwrecks and celestial bodies, trying to make it to the end and rescue a friend. Should

all your Bastards be injured, you'll be returned to the start of that sector.

That's just the uppermost layer, however. Every time you enter a planet's orbit, you're held in place by its jump lock – which can only be broken by sending outlaws down to the surface. There, you enter a mini roguelike run, in which you direct outlaws around a turn-based map – picking fights, dodging patrols, swiping cash and spending it.

So far, so strategy game. But the battles of *Wild Bastards* aren't resolved on a grid or with percentages. Rather, they're lightning-fast FPS showdowns that play out in tight, arena-esque levels. This is a deeply satisfying and consistently surprising blaster in

A legendary and enigmatic starship swoops in to save them

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A hybrid mix of shooter and strategy with critters to spare.

EXPECT TO PAY
£27.80

DEVELOPER
Blue Manchu

PUBLISHER
Maximum Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600X,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
Geforce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

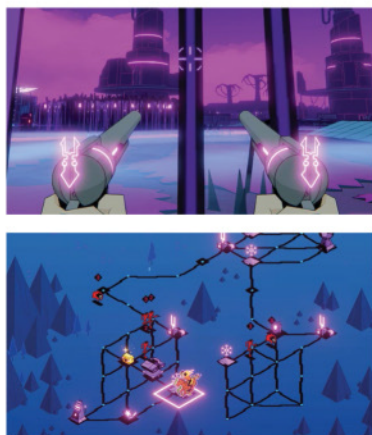
LINK
wildbastards.com

which it feels fantastic to blow away a gunhand with dual revolvers; in which the exploding collar of an unstable kyote – a kind of mechanical dog – can hurl you across the craters of a low-gravity moon. Knowledge is your best defence against the unexpected – so that you can draw a pack of kyotes into a poison lake, and not the other way round.

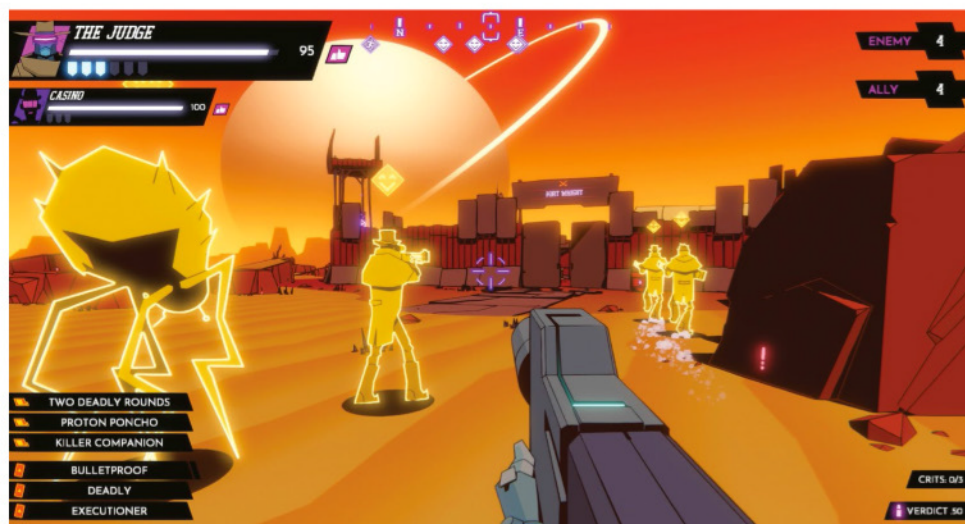
WET WORK

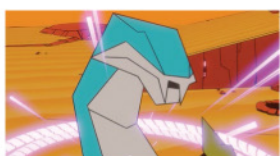
Some of the Bastards are better suited to a direct approach than others – and indeed their sheer variety is one of this game's great joys. Billy the gunslinger is a squid, and so becomes briefly invulnerable whenever he takes damage – a metaphorical jet of ink that allows you to scramble out of harm's way. Roswell is a grey alien whose ultimate fires him ludicrously high into the air for a series of rocket bounces, granting you a momentary overview of the battlefield and the chance to stomp on your opponents.

While you only control one Bastard at a time, you keep another in reserve during battle, as if they were a second weapon. That means you're swapping not just from Casino's



ABOVE: You take turns with patrolling enemies when moving along the roads.





TOP: Some low-gravity sectors boost your jumps during battle.

ABOVE: Hopalong's lasso is great for squeezing enemies, but leaves you exposed.

shotgun to Judge's rifle, but taking on all the traits of that character as well: their movement speed, health bar, and the various perks you've picked up for them on your journey through the sectors. More than a gimmick, this setup brings extraordinary depth to loadout management. Once you realise a wounded Bastard can 'hide' behind their fellow before popping out to grab a health pickup, you start to wonder at the ways you might combine their abilities more cleverly.

Your choice of tag-team for a planetary excursion is guided not only by these tactical considerations, but the circumstances the Bastards find themselves in. It might be that your ideal partnership is scuppered because one is injured, or another has a grudge. Managing your gang is as much about working around their petty squabbles – and your own past mistakes – as optimising your route through the stars. And there's something beautiful in that. By rooting for the Bastards, you're opting to endure their many clashing differences – and to figure out the synergies that might bind them, more powerfully than any force that sets out to flatten their quirks. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

Roguelike and FPS haven't been spliced so well since *Deathloop* – and this game deserves just as much acclaim.

91

This magician hides in a corner and fires off homing balls of pain.



BASTARDLY BREAKDOWN

How to read the screen in a showdown



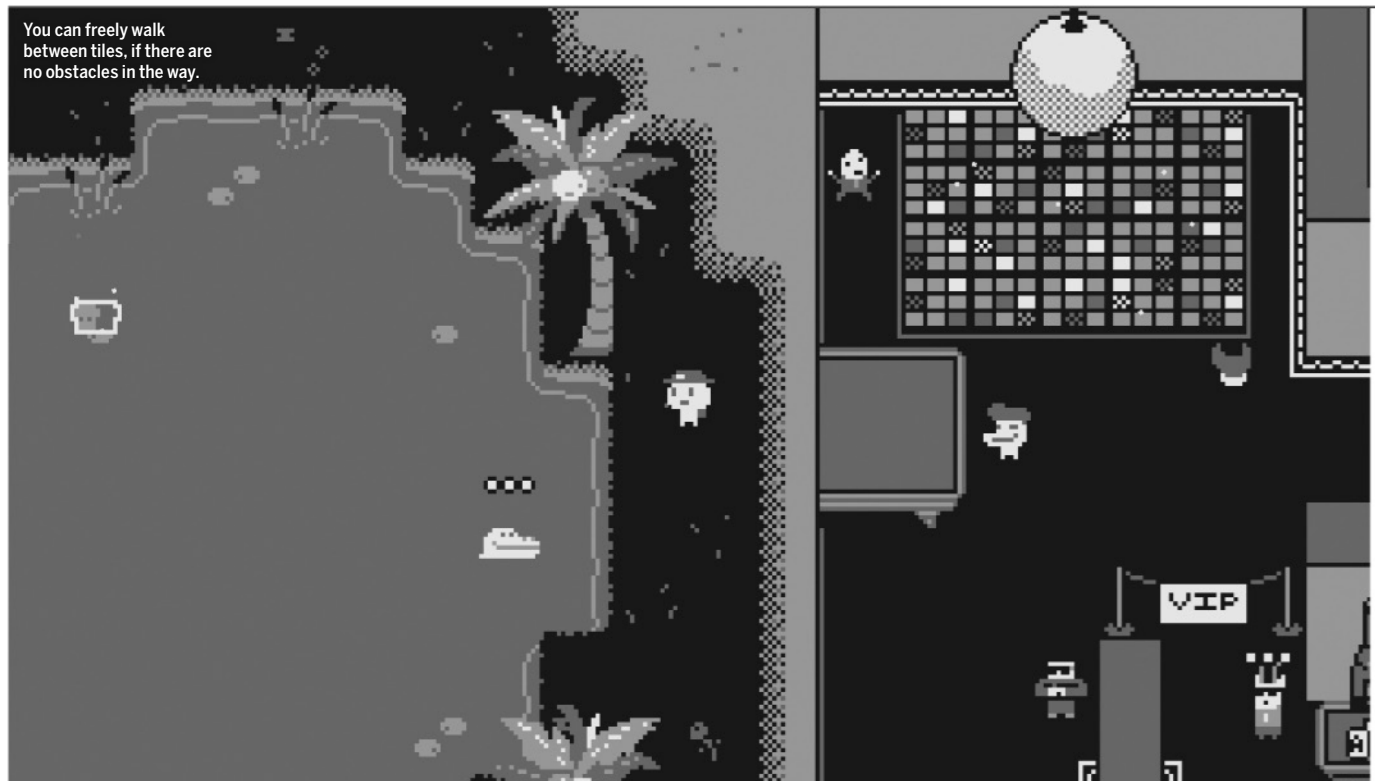
1 A second playable outlaw waits in the wings.

2 He looks rough, but yellow means friendly.

3 Our lizard can slither on the ground at speed.

4 A reminder of all the traits attached to your character.

5 A countdown builds the tension at the start of a fight.



SLIDES RULE

Redeeming a hated puzzle mechanic with **SLIDER**

Somehow, *Slider* has turned the worst parts of adventure games into one very fine puzzle game – and a generous one, given the lack of a price tag. I'm talking about sliding tile puzzles, which tend to be shoehorned into adventure games for reasons unknown, inciting audible groans whenever I'm forced to complete one. Why am I playing – and enjoying – *Slider*, then? With its monochrome, top-down world comprised of sliding puzzle pieces?

Primarily, it's because of how charming it is. It has such a lovely cast of characters: memorable little pixel peeps who find themselves adrift in a world that's been shattered into pieces. You have the power to put it right, one region at a time, by pressing Tab and sliding these world tiles around. On a basic level, you need to connect tiles in certain ways to be able to walk from one to the other, but soon you're restoring rivers and connecting power cables and directing beams of light to clear path-blocking mushrooms. Press Tab again to resume control of the little pixel hero, as they chat to NPCs and hunt more tiles for each mosaic.

Your final goal in each region is to arrange the environment as it was

originally laid out, which locks the tiles in place and opens up the next area. But any danger of repetition vanishes as soon as you enter that area, be it a desert where the tiles slide far too much, or a cave where light is limited.

Directing beams of light to clear path-blocking mushrooms

SLIDING SCALE

Take the *Shifting Seas*, for example, which swaps the land tiles for ocean ones. These can only be rotated on an axis, and not slid around willy-nilly,

while you're given an anchor to tactically lock one tile in place. As you sail your ship around, puzzling out treasure to trade with the local barkeep, you could almost be playing a different game.

The simple act of sliding feels so good, with a tectonic screenshake

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An adventure puzzle game in which you save the world by sliding its shattered tiles around

EXPECT TO PAY

Free

DEVELOPER

boomo

PUBLISHER

boomo

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

bit.ly/SliderGame

that makes you feel like a god, and with puzzles that require your power in increasingly clever ways. A lot of puzzle games can feel dry, but almost every brainteaser here features a charming character, like a bumbling wizard constantly messing up his spell, or a lovelorn couple trying to communicate across the game board. That's the secret ingredient of *Slider*, aside from the sheer size of the adventure and the constant reinvention of its central mechanic: the characters accompanying you.

Was it enough to change my mind about sliding tile puzzles? Er, no – I still find them to be overwhelming and tedious, even in this best-in-class puzzle game – but I don't mind them *quite* as much now, which I guess means something? If you're similarly tile-averse, I'd still recommend this lovely puzzle game – and for tile-heads, you may have just slid into heaven. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Clever puzzles, sweet characters and a sense of humour. There's something for everyone in this puzzle game.

84

BELOW: Appropriately, Dassalo has a mic as a weapon. What a stand-up guy.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Gumpy Function

LINK
bit.ly/SuperDassalo

DIVINE COMEDY?

Live, laugh, leap in platformer **SUPER DASSALO LAND**

I can't be alone in missing licensed platformers (right?), even if their quality was variable, to put it kindly. So I was happy to fire up *Super Dassalo Land*, a new game playable on GB hardware, but also in your browser.

What's it licensing? An actual person, comedian Tommy Dassalo, who has been shrunk down and inserted into his notebook. Stages reflect the inside of his head, with World 1 being themed around ramen, and World 2 reflecting his late-night obsessive phone use. Part *Comix Zone* and part *Mario*, it's a hyperactive, funny throwback with some good ideas that doesn't outstay its welcome.

We've got to talk about the pixel art, which (like most of the game) was done by Game Boy wizard Gumpy Function, who has made some of the best modern, unofficial

GB games. With its detailed sprites, *Super Dassalo Land* looks like a tie-in to a '90s cartoon that never was.

The jokes generally poke fun at Dassalo himself, with the best insults being delivered by his dog Kewpie, who has come along for the ride. You can get the gist of Dassalo's self-deprecating, nerdy comedy from just the cutscenes, though having never heard of him, I did feel like I was missing some vital context. He might be worth a Google first.

The platforming is basic yet solid, elevated by the strong theming. World 2 features platforms made of browser windows and an amusing boss in a persistent pop-up.

Interestingly, you can't actually die: you only ruin your score. It's a smart modern concession in a genre that reliably trounced me when I was a kid. ■

70

BLOODY GOOD

The blood must flow in **COAGULATION STATION**

Saddled with an enormous debt, you can hardly pass up the opportunity to become a Clot Management Specialist on a living meat planet known as Carrion Prime. It's exactly as fleshy as you're expecting, as you oversee a blood pumping operation in this stressful horror game.

It all starts simply enough, as you push the button to start the pump and then hang back, just in case anything goes wrong. At first it's leaks from nearby pipes, which are easily fixed with your wrench, and then unsettling blockages (toothy fish, mostly) that need to be plucked out and fed into the nearest grinder. But the scariest part is having to put on a diving suit and ride the lift down into the blood sea to clear an intake pipe.

Coagulation Station – and let's take a moment to appreciate the

name – is at its best during these agonising descents, as you leave the urgently ticking clock behind and wonder just how much time you've wasted. The lift stops. There are strange noises and lights as you gradually make your way back up.

There's a timer and quota to hit, and the lift to the surface will only unlock if you meet it. Be prepared to see the 'Dark' ending – this is a horror game, after all, and perhaps it's more fitting to end up... well, it's not very pleasant.

Indie games have got this kind of short-form, linear horror story down to a fine art. *Coagulation Station* nails the pacing and tension, as you frantically spin plates and mince fish to meet the quota. It's a horrible premise, well-realised – but it's funny to boot. That's an accomplished balancing act. ■

BELOW: Fail to meet the quota in time, you won't escape the blood surge.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
The Big Onion Institute

LINK
bit.ly/CoagulationGame

73

Fat Face's A/W 2024 campaign was a low point for the high street retailer.



DINER HARD

Rewriting the rules of horror in **ALAN WAKE**

Is it possible to forget you've written an entire book? The premise of *Alan Wake*, on the surface, seems absurd. But I've started re-re-reviewing games for this column that I'd literally covered only months before, so perhaps it's feasible. Maybe I've already re-reviewed *Alan Wake* and this is actually a clever metacommentary (I have, but it was years ago, so it's fine).

That's the level of cleverness that *Alan Wake* aspires to: the sort of cosy, self-referential attention to detail that makes you feel valued because you know the source material. It's refreshing that the game makes zero effort to obscure its influences.

The actual first words in the game are 'Stephen King'. And episodes of *Night Springs*, a fictional anthology that's a naked celebration of *The Twilight Zone*, play on TVs throughout the world. *Alan Wake* wants you to know that it loves the things you love.

Somehow, these references within references never end up being jarring or disappointing. It's like finding a trashy horror novel inside a VHS case. Yes, you were expecting *Slumber Party Massacre 2*, but the

thought of sitting down with buttered rum and a battered copy of *Slugs* is appealing, too. There's an infectious love for the source material that extends to the general feel of the game. You're essentially playing a Pinterest board celebrating the

Pacific Northwest: mist, forests, fishing vests, and baked apples. This even extends to the collectibles, such as the (surprisingly readable) manuscript pages and flasks of hot coffee, the lifeblood of every hack writer. Perhaps

everything Alan's experiencing is the result of midnight palpitations after too many Oh Deer triple espressos.

BLOCK AND LOAD

The combat is deliberately stressful, like reverse parking in the dark. Torch batteries need maintaining;

Clumsy, dangerous, and delirious, like trying to steal a tuba

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The loot Sam Lake's brain would drop if it died in a videogame

EXPECT TO PAY
£11.40

DEVELOPER
Remedy Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Remedy Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/108710/Alan_Wake

reloading takes ages; and even traversing the world can be a source of horror. You are not Leon Kennedy, vaulting over walls – Alan is more like a damaged ice cream truck with carpal tunnel syndrome. Running away from stuff is clumsy, dangerous, and delirious, like trying to steal a tuba on public transport. The chaos keeps things exhilarating.

In many ways, *Alan Wake* is the perfect game for people into extremely detailed descriptions of cars: ideal for anyone with an appreciation for cabbagey horror heroes and halogen torches. You can even use vehicle headlights to defeat otherworldly assailants, which is the most dad thing since pointing the stud finder at yourself to test if it's working. It's also the only time I'll stop complaining about LED headlights being too bright. *Night driving with astigmatism: scarier than any horror game.* ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A dark and endearingly detailed ode to David Lynch, Stephen King, and the foresty bits of *The X-Files*.

82

BOTTOM: Does this count as one piece of hold luggage? Take that, EasyJet.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£16.75

DEVELOPER
Out of the Blue Games

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

TERROR DERMA

Sinister dealings and skin complaints in **CALL OF THE SEA**

A good journal can bring purpose and humanity to a game. Instead of a dry list of completed missions, the likes of Arthur's notebook from *Red Dead Redemption 2* become a tactile record of everything you've done: a personal list of bludgeonings and robberies, punctuated by the occasional sad drawing of a bison.

When I pitch the 'best journals in games' listicle, Norah Everhart's will certainly be on there. It looks beautiful but it's also an essential way of recording clues. This is handy, especially for anyone (me) without the capacity for differentiating seven different types of triangle. Best of all, the clues Norah the Explorer records are arranged in a way that makes it obvious when you've missed one.

The puzzles ask more of me than I expect from most mystery games.

You usually have most of the information, but there's often a tantalising gap that requires actual deduction. This results in backtracking but, thankfully, the locations here are worth exploring. The only exceptions are the underwater sections, which are narratively important but sluggish to play.

The story is a compelling one – especially when you get further in and understand the ultimate solution to Norah's tricky skin complaint – but I must admit the constant external monologuing clanged for me. Overall, however, it's a refreshing take on a Lovecraft-adjacent mythos. Instead of unpronounceable names and abstract terrors, *Call of the Sea* gives us something personal and evolutionary, sketched via nicely drawn shapes in a pocketbook. ■

81

SEAHOG DAY

Shiv, lie, repeat: getting away with murder in **OVERBOARD!**

If my crime is killing people who probably deserved it, then lock me up now. Malcolm, my husband, went into the deep for being a philandering proto-fascist; Clarrisa was a mewling adulterer; and Lady Armstrong took her martinis dirty, like a dog licking vomit out of sock. Disposing of them is a public service.

Reading this back, I wonder if *Overboard!* is bringing out the worst in me. It's a compact, immediate, amusing take on the golden age of detective fiction; the best of Dorothy Sayers, blended with the pace and charm of *80 Days*, garnished with some revealing self-analysis. It's perhaps worrying that I got away with murder on my first attempt, even if I did get blackmailed afterwards. And while my favourite moments in *Overboard!* often involve

throwing around red herrings like I'm in an Agatha Christie novel, it's really not just about eluding the police. Escape, and the game will task you with pinning the crime on another passenger, for example. It packs an alarming amount of intrigue into each 20-minute run.

The characters are also interesting enough that you'll want to play it numerous times, just to get to know them. In my first run I spent an unhelpful amount of time chatting with Major Singh, purely because I was interested in his storied life. This makes it a deeply pleasing game to just exist within, and it's amazing how much I can glean about my wretched dead husband just from snappy, second-hand anecdotes. The more I learn, the less I regret killing him. And I already didn't regret it at all. ■

BELOW: Reading Poirot has taught me to always steal the sleeping pills.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£11.40

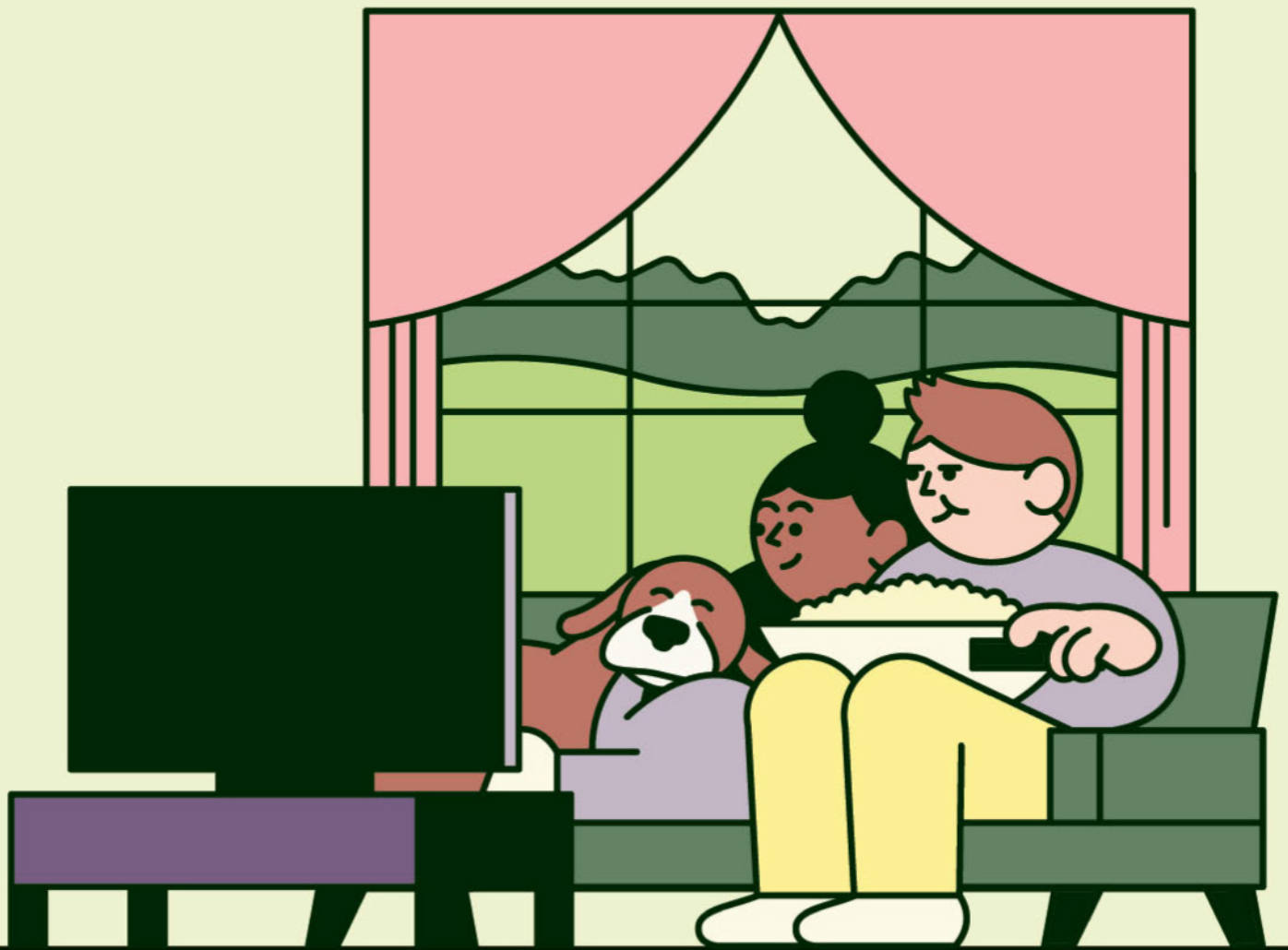
DEVELOPER
inkle Ltd

PUBLISHER
inkle Ltd

88

SAVVY SAVERS, STEP THIS WAY.

Discover cover options for car, home and travel insurance, plus broadband and more.



GO.
COMPARE

Get more information and compare quotes at [Go.Compare](https://www.go.compare).

HARDWARE

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BUYER'S GUIDE

Build a great gaming PC no matter your budget.



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GROUP TEST

Six top PC gaming handhelds tested.

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TECH REPORT

Will software-level performance tech kill hardware upgrades?

102

TECH TALES

Can AI make you a better gamer?



GROUP TEST

HANDHELD GAMING PCs

In lieu of more powerful processors, handhelds are getting weirder

By Jacob Ridley



We've experienced a new form factor take hold of PC gaming over the past few years: the handheld gaming PC. Advancements in onboard graphics chips and chip manufacturing technologies means we now have the low power, high performance processors required to make a fully-fledge gaming PC able to fit inside the pockets of a man with very sizeable pockets. That's progress.

It all kicked off with the Steam Deck. There were a handful (get it?) that arrived prior to that, except they weren't very good. Nowadays a smorgasbord of Windows-based handhelds are available thanks to the performance offered by AMD's Ryzen 7 7740HS and Ryzen Z1 Extreme – effectively the same chip – powered by the 780M iGPU. But where do manufacturers go next?

New and improved Ryzen AI chips are only available in a small number of laptops currently. In the meantime, handhelds have gotten weirder and more wonderful. OLED screens, compact designs, beefy tablets and even a PC equivalent of the Nintendo DS – you needn't stick with a simple screen and a couple of analogue sticks these days.



1



Steam Deck OLED

VALVE **£569**

0-0-0-OLED

1 If you want to look to a single device for kickstarting our love affair with handheld gaming PCs, it is the Steam Deck. This plucky device offers less performance than most, an OS unfamiliar to many, and a size bigger than others. Yet despite its limitations, it remains a fantastic pick. That probably comes down to the fact it's absurdly good value for money. The Steam Deck OLED only improves on the base formula that has proven so successful for Valve. It comes with the same AMD APU as the initial model, except now it's attached to a larger 7.4-inch

OLED screen. It's very bright at 1,000 nits, though the wide colour gamut is the main attraction, which pairs wonderfully with HDR content.

Valve improved the battery life on the Steam Deck OLED too. So while it looks so much better, it'll also last longer away from a plug. With these improvements, alongside higher storage options and some weight savings, the Steam Deck OLED has become the de facto Valve handheld.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Gorgeous screen
- Excellent OS
- Low performance

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD SEPHIROTH / GPU: 8 CU RDNA 2 / RAM: 16 GB LPDDR5 / STORAGE: 1 TB NVME SSD / DISPLAY: 7.4-INCH OLED

Kun

AYANEO **~£1,035**

Big & bold

2 The Ayaneo Kun is a seriously beefy handheld. The version we've tested comes with 32 GB of LPDDR5-7500, which is faster than my desktop PC, and comes with a 2 TB Lexar SSD. Though, importantly, the same Ryzen 7 chip as most of the others on this list. So, just be wary of performance before you're swayed by its 2560x1600 resolution screen.

That screen is a mighty eight-inch IPS. That's not OLED like the Steam Deck, and that's noticeable when it comes to the overall vibrancy, which is a little lacking. The 60Hz refresh rate

helps keep the battery life steady for this handheld, but is also a bit more limited.

For a handheld that appeared the ultimate iteration of the first generation, the Ayaneo Kun just isn't quite all it's cracked up to be. The 54W mode was a little flaky in our testing and the D-pad is a bit sticky, too. The trackpads on the device are pretty impressive for navigating the desktop, but Ayaneo's own Flip DS also offers a superb solution for that.

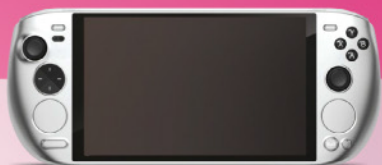
PC GAMER VERDICT

- Peak handheld design
- Weak on vibrancy
- 54 W mode isn't great

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD RYZEN 7 7840U / GPU: RADEON 780M / RAM: 32 GB LPDDR5 / STORAGE: 2 TB NVME SSD / DISPLAY: 8-INCH IPS

4

2



3



**THIS HANDHELD IS
THE TOP OF MY LIST
RIGHT NOW**

X1

ONEXPLAYER £1,089

Maybe not

3 There's something so tantalising about the OneXPlayer X1... on paper. A 3-in-1 design inclusive of a 11-inch tablet, gaming handheld and compact ultrabook – what more could you want? Unfortunately, after using the thing, we would rather anything else. Turns out you can't actually have it all, at least not in a single device. The problem with the OneXPlayer is that it excels at nothing. It's a pretty poor laptop, the flappy keyboard being awkward to use and even worse to store while travelling, and it's a pretty poor handheld too, with controllers that don't feel very

nice to use. In both instances, a laptop or other gaming handheld would do a much better job. This handheld is a little different to the others in that it isn't powered by AMD. It's powered by Intel Meteor Lake. The iGPU inside it is pretty powerful, but where it slips up is in consistency. Now where have we heard that before? Oh, that's right: Intel's Arc GPUs. The same problems exist for the OneXPlayer. It's great in one game, a slowpoke in the next.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Lots of screen space
- Do you have it a size smaller?
- Floppy keyboard

SPECS PROCESSOR: INTEL CORE 7 ULTRA 155H / GPU: INTEL ARC / RAM: 32 GB LPDDR5X / STORAGE: 1 TB NVME SSD / DISPLAY: 11-INCH LTIPS

Flip DS

AYANEO £582

Nintendo-a-like

4 If you notice anything from weird and wonderful handheld gaming PCs, let it be this: they've all come up with designs that are eerily similar to Nintendo devices from the past couple of decades. Those Nintendo folks were really onto something. Who knew?

The Ayaneo Flip DS is the most obvious homage to a Nintendo device – I mean, it's literally a Nintendo DS. Though to act as though it doesn't bring anything new to the table would be a mistake. This handheld is the top of my list right now because it does one thing better than all the others: desktop

navigation. Using a handheld as an actual computer is a challenge without a mouse, monitor and keyboard attached, but that sort of defeats the point. What the Flip DS offers is a tiny capacitive pad which lets you glide the pointer around like a trackpad. It works well, and replaces the analogue sticks. The second screen also turns into a permanent keyboard, track pad, or shortcut application – all of which make actually using the Flip DS as a gaming PC a joy.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Best for browsing
- Second screen is great
- Compact

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD RYZEN 7 8840U / GPU: RADEON 780M / RAM: 16 GB LPDDR5 / STORAGE: 512 GB NVME SSD / DISPLAY: 7-INCH IPS + 3.5-INCH TOUCHSCREEN



ROG Ally X

ASUS £799

The X factor

5 Most recently released handheld PCs are remakes of models that came out a few years ago. New and improved versions of already shipping hardware. That may sound boring, and I guess compared to truly modern kit it is. The ROG Ally X, however, just goes to show that you don't need more firepower to make a much more impressive device.

I will struggle to list everything new in the ROG Ally X versus the ROG Ally, so I'll focus on the best bits. First and foremost, the much larger battery. The Ally X has double the battery life on paper, and a little over double in

our testing. It's a little heavier than its predecessor as a result, but the new redesigned chassis makes it feel just as good in-hand. In fact, it's actually a bit comfier. When I say there have been no changes to the hardware that is a little bit of a lie. The AMD APU remains the same as the original Ally, however, the Ally X comes with more RAM at 24 GB. For a chip sharing memory between the CPU and GPU, that makes for a fairer split.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Superb battery
- Comfortable
- More RAM

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD RYZEN 7 7840U / GPU: RADEON 780M / RAM: 32 GB LPDDR5 / STORAGE: 2 TB NVME SSD / DISPLAY: 8-INCH IPS

Legion Go

LENOVO £600

Nintendo-a-like #2

6 The Lenovo Legion Go was a bit of a latecomer to the handheld PC party, and as such it has tried to do a few things that the first wave didn't. For starters, it comes with detachable controllers. These may seem like yet another obvious nod to Nintendo's excellent design team, but they are handy on a heavy handheld PC. You can set the Legion Go down on a long flight, prop it upright using the included stand, and disconnect both controllers to lounge back as you game.

One of the controllers also doubles up as a gaming mouse. I know, gimmick central, but in

practice it's not half bad. I wouldn't buy the Legion Go for this, however, I'd buy one for the fairly affordable price tag and fantastic build quality. The Legion Go really does stand out more for its fantastic quality than it does any of the more gimmicky features it offers. Also, like the Kun, it comes with a greater than 1080p screen, though it's once again ruled mostly pointless by the same Ryzen APU inside its chassis as everyone else.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Detachable controllers
- Fantastic quality
- 1600p is wasted

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD RYZEN Z1 EXTREME / GPU: RADEON 780M / RAM: 16 GB LPDDR5 / STORAGE: 512 GB/1 TB NVME SSD / DISPLAY: 8.8-INCH IPS



ONE OF THE CONTROLLERS
ALSO DOUBLES UP AS A
GAMING MOUSE

How AI frame generation actually works.

Image credit: Getty Images

HARD SELL

Will software-level tech like **FRAME GENERATION** kill hardware upgrades?

As hard as it is to conceive now, 25 years ago both computing and the internet itself were new and poorly understood entities. There were constant ads on TV for internet literacy courses in which frowning 40-somethings were guided through tasks like sending an email by a grinning technician in a colourful polo shirt and a headset mic. This sudden onset of life-changing beige machinery was happening so quickly, and none of us had the slightest idea how any of it worked.

Which is how it came to pass that when my supposed friend Luke Woodroffe told me, one day on the school bus, that I could just download a better graphics card for my PC, I didn't immediately disregard the notion. It was as simple, he told me, as entering the desired graphics card into a search engine and then downloading a small file from a particular website.

Whether Luke genuinely believed that the driver updates he was directing me towards would transform a Voodoo 2 into a Voodoo 3 remains unclear to this day. But unless everyone I've told this story to has uniformly lied to me out of compassion, I'm not the only one to have entertained the idea of simply downloading a PC upgrade from the internet.

It's pure fantasy, of course. You can't download a better graphics card any more than you can illegally torrent a sports car, or paste in the code from Github for a Michelin star dinner. At least, it certainly seemed that cut-and-dried until recently.

Nvidia's DLSS began a blurring of the lines between hardware-driven gaming performance and the stuff of datacenters. In its earliest incarnation, the green giant's breakthrough tech involved training a supercomputer on billions of individual frames from a supported title until it could interpolate between them, allowing you, in your normal house that doesn't have a supercomputer in it, to run games at higher upscaled resolutions onscreen than you were running natively.

The RTX 2-series' Turing cores were dedicated to AI-based data processing, and turned all of that neural network AI training into game-ready drivers with actionable local upscaling, happening in real-time and saving your GPU's resources from having to output frames in a higher native res.

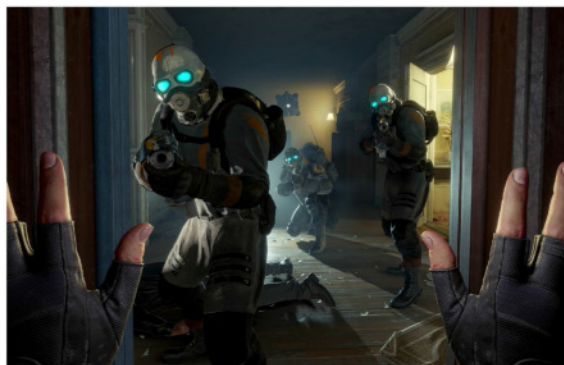
It was a cool lateral move from Nvidia, one that went beyond the usual 'more cores, more VRAM, more clockspeed'. But it still felt tied to the hardware. You needed the Turing architecture's special cores to action all the supercomputer-created data that was written into the drivers.

DLSS frame generation has abstracted the relationship between local hardware and performance further. Here is a



Five alive

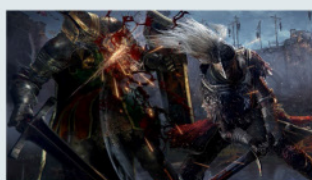
Unconfirmed rumours about Nvidia's RTX 5-series cards are simply of more cores, faster clocks and more memory, along with a slimmer profile. AMD's next move, the RX8000 cards, are closer to launch by all accounts, but there's no AI revolution being whispered about from that side either. It all points to a gradual refinement of the frame-gen technologies we already have, rather than another big leap forwards.



FAR LEFT: Frame gen's just one of Lossless Scaling's tricks, along with AI upscaling.

LEFT: Getting more frames for free is a lifesaver in VR for staving off nausea.

STAT'S ENTERTAINMENT *Four games transformed by frame gen's FPS boost*



ELDEN RING

In theory, the 60fps lock can be bypassed by Lossless Scaling, but artefacts and frame pacing blunt its effectiveness.



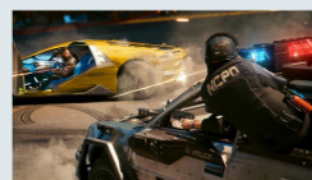
FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2020

Even the mighty 4090 struggles to render Earth at 4K60 without a little help from DLSS 3.



F1 24

A racing game with an elbows-out online community: the perfect conditions for running a synced 120/240fps.



CYBERPUNK 2077

Ah yes, *Cyberpunk*. We meet again. Not so cocky now that we can run you at 60fps with ray tracing on, are you?

tech that can magic up extra frames from thin air using AI, and only works on RTX 4-series cards. And it wasn't immediately clear why that was the case.

The situation was made only muddier by the release of a homebrewed .dll file which added DLSS 3's frame generation feature to RTX 2 and 3-series cards for *Portal Prelude RTX* late in 2023. Since then, .dlls for several other titles have been added and while they don't function flawlessly like Nvidia's official frame generation does (in fact they suffer some pretty terrible frame pacing issues) it makes one wonder why the official support only extends as far as the graphics giant's newest and most expensive GPU generation.

GENERATION GAME

AMD's equivalent for Radeon, Fluid Motion Frames 2, has had quite the glow-up since its artefact-laden debut, and it's proving a worthy opponent to Team Green's tech. But the sheer effectiveness of these technologies is eerie. To a generation of gamers who've become hardwired to the truism that only buying new pieces of silicon can buy you meaningful performance gains, frame generation feels like anabolic steroids. The results are there, yes, in abundance. But it all feels a bit unnatural.

The endgame moment for this phenomenon is Lossless Scaling. In some quarters this £6 Steam app is already legendary, offering a totally GPU-agnostic version of both AI upscaling and frame generation. If somebody can code this absolute wizardry for a wide range of GPUs, and it actually boosts your frame rates in games, what's the point of buying a better GPU? What would be the point of the entire PC

hardware upgrade market as we know it? We haven't stepped into the RGB Twilight Zone quite yet, though. While DLSS 3 frame-gen and AMD FMF require per-title support by which the developers allow the frame gen tech to see motion vectors and discern between 3D environment and HUD before the two rendered frames enter the pipeline, Lossless Scaling doesn't get that VIP access.

MOVING PARTS

And because it works in a very different way, the results are pretty different too. With my RTX 2080 TI there's some very strange frame pacing going on when I use Lossless Scaling's frame generation in most games, and that makes it feel like it's running at less than 60fps due to the sheer and sudden fluctuations. The RTX 4090's DLSS 3 frame generation, on the other hand, arrives onscreen in a nice, neat, uniform manner. And while you

have to squint to notice the artefacts with the latter, Lossless Scaling's lack of motion vectors means it has to guess which elements are in motion, and which pixels are part of the HUD too. That makes for some quite imprecise moving parts, particularly in frenetic games like *Elden Ring*, with its infuriating hard 60fps lock which should make for such an easy win for Lossless Scaling.

Still, it's early days. At the time of writing, Nvidia and AMD have yet to show their hands regarding the next generation of graphics cards, and whatever their hardware specs on paper, it'll probably be the AI-based advancements that defines the next round of GPUs just as it did for the current gen. ■

Phil Iwanik

ONLY BUYING NEW SILICON CAN BUY YOU MEANINGFUL PERFORMANCE GAINS

TRACK GPT

AI's teaching sim racers to improve – what about other games?

Here's something nice and comforting about track racing: you know what's going to happen next. While nearly every other genre is constantly trying to defy and subvert your expectations about what lies just around the corner, some even introducing procedural generation so that even the game doesn't know what's going to happen next, in sim racing it's about doing the same thing, over and over again, but better.

And that gives it a unique advantage: it's easier to teach someone how to be quick around a track than it is to teach them how to win a round of *Counter-Strike 2* or score a goal in *FC24*, because there are fewer variables. When you're hotlapping for a new record you don't have to factor in what anyone's doing around you, and the track isn't being recalibrated from lap to lap. You learn the braking points, the racing lines and the throttle inputs and then you perfect them.

This isn't news in itself, of course, but it's important because it means AI can be used in a different way in racing games. Not just to program offline opponents who seem much smarter than their counterparts in shooters and battle royales, but to build AI tutors who can teach you how to drive faster.

Enter Trophi AI, the latest sim racing coach to aggressively target your Instagram feed, offering one-on-one coaching of a different kind. The non-human kind.

Here's how it works: you sign up on the website, download the client, then load one of the four titles it currently supports: *iRacing*, *Assetto Corsa Competizione*, *F1 23* or *Rocket League*. Then you select a recorded lap performed by an elite sim racer, load up the game and start hotlapping in the same car and track.

Trophi AI gives you a selection of telemetry overlays so that you can observe the differences between the recorded

lap time's braking and throttle inputs and your own, in real time. Then you can record a lap and watch the differences back. So far so good, but not quite revolutionary.

This is where it gets interesting: it's also introduced a voice-led coaching feature which not only gives you braking and throttle cues, but analyses your laps and tells you specifically how to improve the next time you take a corner. Brake 20 metres later, ease off the brake pressure by 40%, turn in 50 metres sooner. That kind of thing.

Perhaps that sounds a bit like cheating. After all, if a training tool emitted a beep whenever an enemy appeared onscreen in *CS2* you'd be in VAC ban prison faster than you can say 'it's free to play anyway, who cares, there's no effective deterrent against cheaters in f2p live service model releases'. Which, admittedly, takes a while.

In practice, these sound cues don't ensure a perfect lap. It still takes a lot of skill, muscle memory and practice to implement the cues that a training app like Trophi AI gives you. That's up for debate, of course, but the fact that it's supported by the two biggest sim racing titles out there lends it some legitimacy.

As does the collab with Scott 'Driver61' Mansell, son of British F1 world champion Nigel Mansell and successful racing and sim racing YouTube. Mansell offers personal coaching sessions via Trophi AI for those who prefer a human touch to AI number-crunching, although having used Trophi AI for a while now, it's hard to see what information any human racer could offer that's more precise or useful than what Trophi AI provides.

ARTIFICIAL SIMTELLIGENCE

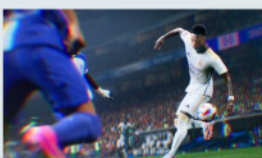
Which is a bit scary, isn't it? And the next question it poses is: what other areas of competitive gaming might AI tuition prove useful in? There's a cottage industry sustaining itself on Fiverr and other platforms whereby former pros and top-ranked players of MOBAs, shooters, BRs and even *Fall Guys* offer their expertise over paid one-on-one Zoom

IT ANALYSES YOUR LAPS AND TELLS YOU SPECIFICALLY HOW TO IMPROVE



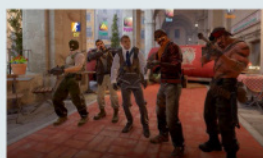
PHIL IWANIUK
Freelancer Phil briefly looked into changing his name to Phil Al-waniuk by deed poll in a canny bid to get his eventual AI overlords on side. Too pricey though, apparently.

BIG DUMB FUN *Four games that'd be transformed by decent AI opponents*



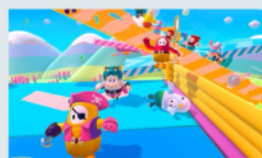
EA FC24

Imagine playing an offline match against a team that used skill moves. It'd be like your dog turning round and talking to you.



COUNTER-STRIKE 2

It can see you quicker and aim better than a human, yet the CS AI still looks like a drunk wedding guest being asked to leave.



FALL GUYS

Full games against AI opponents, whenever you like. It's the holy grail for lockdown favourite *Fall Guys*, and it's still not happened.



PUBG

Vehicles are still a mystery to the AI fodder of *Erangel*. Pity them: they exist only to wear silly outfits and get run over.



calls. Could AI replace all of them in one fell blow?

Not imminently. Because as we've covered, there are way more variables to track in those other genres. Fights might take place at any point in any number of maps, between players of almost innumerable different positions, with different loadouts, health and armour values and numerous other variables. Right now it's easier to apply a human being's 'game sense' from one person to the next than it is to train an AI to adequately factor in all of those variables. Because we're better at making the mental leap: *this isn't quite the same as the last time I was in a gunfight here, but I can apply a few learnings from that experience.*

Again, we only need to look at the quality of AI opponents in other games compared to racing titles for a reassuring view of how much work is yet to be done. If AI relies on superior targeting and robotic aim accuracy to beat us in CS2, rather than tactics, positioning, equipment or eco, there's nothing it can impart to us as a coach that would actually prove useful. For now. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: AI actually makes for a decent one-on-one sim racing coach.

BELOW: Trophi AI gives you a lot of useful info to help you improve.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

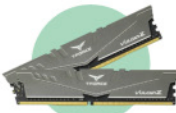
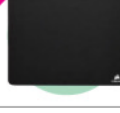
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,018

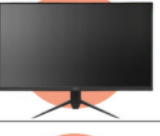
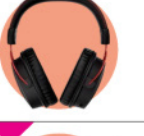
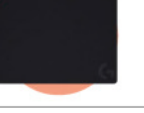
MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £103 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £170 With ten cores, six of them the Performance kind, this Raptor Lake Core i5 is fantastic value and a great all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 7600 AMD £249 AMD delivers what we need for 1080p gaming at a solid price. AMD claims it'll do over 350fps in <i>Rocket League</i> , which is a lot.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200. This is the sweet spot for RAM right now, as DDR5 can be expensive.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 550W Be Quiet! £90 Say it with me now: never skimp on the power supply. This is the minimum recommended for the Radeon GPU.
SSD		SN770 1 TB Western Digital £67 It's time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive, even for a budget PC. You'll appreciate the extra speed and fast boot times.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £132 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G203 Logitech £24 A classic shape and 8,000 DPI optical sensor delivered in a sleek shell, this wired mouse fits all hand sizes and grips.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,549

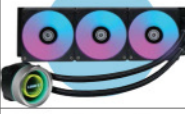
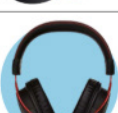
MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £170 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £244 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £390 If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card here.
COOLER		Freezer 36 Arctic £24 It's cheap yet effective – you can't ask for more than that. With two fans and four heatpipes, it'll go at up to 1,800 rpm.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 1TB Lexar £73 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £210 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £40 This Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,798

MOTHERBOARD		MEG X670E Ace MSI £700 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 7950X3D AMD £550 AMD's 3D stacked chips are awesome for gaming, thanks to heaps of cache. This Ryzen 9 is the best of the bunch.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Nvidia £1,699 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £134 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £229 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,349 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £190 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £118 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha Wireless HyperX £135 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“Ninja Turtles have turned out to have this wonderful longevity”

Getting a crash course in my new favourite superhero setting with **TMNT: SHREDDER'S REVENGE**

I've been seeing the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles everywhere, lately. There's a new TV show out, my favourite board game just announced a TMNT crossover, and hell, I couldn't even walk through town without seeing a bunch of luminous green tie-in bath bombs in the window of Lush.

Some would argue I'm just proving very susceptible to a big marketing push for the series' 40th anniversary, but I choose to believe it's fate. As a kid, the Turtles kind of passed me by – clearly now the universe is telling me to course-correct.

Of course, I'm only truly capable of processing things when they're in the form of a videogame, so the final sign to set me on this path was 2022's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*:

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Introduced “cowabunga” into his regular vocabulary.

ALSO PLAYED
Dungeons & Degenerate Gamblers

Shredder's Revenge being given out for free on Amazon's Prime Gaming. As good a place to start as any, right?

It's a hell of a good time. Though I've never really clicked with arcade-style beat-'em-ups before, I found *Shredder's Revenge's* modernised take on side-scrolling combat immediately satisfying. The visual style is wonderfully colourful and creative, and the huge cast of TMNT cameos make it feel like a big reunion tour.

And the soundtrack! Tee Lopes' catchy, energetic original score is

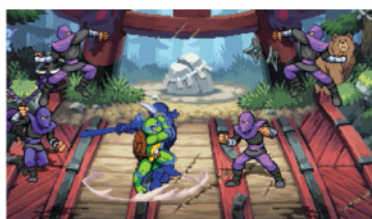
TOP: A Saturday morning cartoon-style intro sets the tone perfectly.

perfectly calibrated to get you instantly pumped up for the action. Try listening to it with your morning shower – you'll absolutely crush your day, I guarantee it.

TURTLE POWER

As I went on to explore TMNT in other mediums, what struck me is how versatile it is. *Shredder's Revenge* is a goofy, nostalgic throwback to the era of the '80s cartoon, with a story about an alien turning the Statue of Liberty into a giant mech suit. Reading the modern comics by IDW I discover they're much darker and more serious – tales of revenge,

A GOOFY, NOSTALGIC THROWBACK TO THE ERA OF THE '80S CARTOON

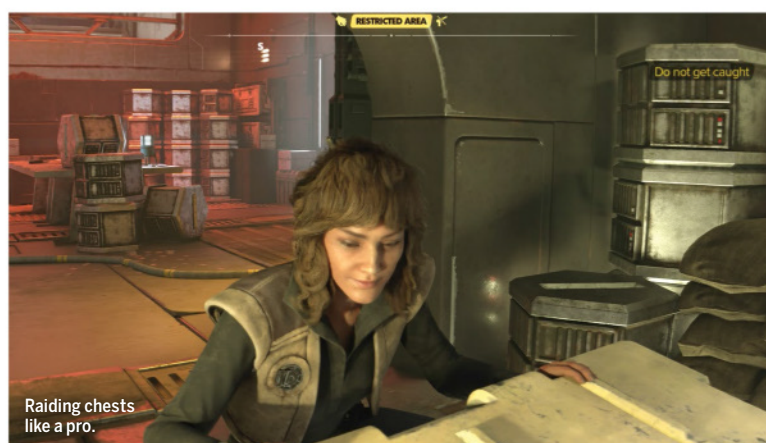


trauma, and war in the streets. And then movie night reveals that the latest film, *Mutant Mayhem*, is a visually experimental coming-of-age story with real teens in the lead roles.

Every version has its own tone, origin story, and visual style, and yet they all feel part of the same tapestry. *Ninja Turtles* have turned out to have this wonderful longevity and flexibility to it, such that an arcade throwback videogame can be just as good an introduction as an '80s live action movie or a 2012 CGI cartoon.

How refreshing is that, in a world full of massive franchises obsessed with all-consuming canon and, frankly, taking themselves too seriously? Playing *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* on the PlayStation 5 shortly after *Shredder's Revenge*, I'm struck by how stuffy it is by comparison. Meanwhile, *TMNT* refuses to even nail down whether its main characters are reincarnated ninjas, mystical warriors, or just some turtles that watched a martial arts video.

Thanks to *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge*, I now know what my favourite superhero setting is: it's the one full of ridiculous mutant animals and a million different ideas of what to do with them. Cowabunga! ■



“Kay Vess, galactic tomb raider”

Feeling like Lara Croft in **STAR WARS: OUTLAWS**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Looted with wild abandon.

ALSO PLAYED
WH40K: Space Marine 2,
Kingdom Come: Deliverance

I should have seen it coming really. The moment Kay Vess, space scoundrel, approached a very, very familiar-looking crack in a rock face and, with an all-too-familiar side-on animation, proceeded to squeeze her body through it, pausing mid-crack to take the familiar look back. Yes, *Lara Croft* lives once again and, being candid, it's not just this incredibly similar animation that makes me feel like I'm playing Crystal Dynamics' fourth entry in its *Tomb Raider* series, most likely called *Galaxy of the Tomb Raider*, rather than Ubisoft's new *Star Wars: Outlaws* game.

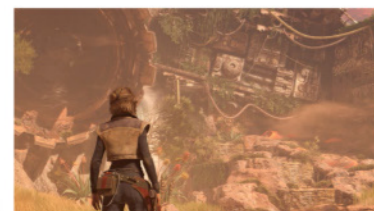
Kay Vess, galactic tomb raider, can do plenty of other things that feel incredibly Crystal Dynamics' *Tomb Raider*, too, including climbing walls, jumping between ledges on walls, cracking a light when entering dark places to raid, throwing and using a grappling hook to swing between locations, sliding down muddy banks while being shot at by enemies, jumping at the last minute from those muddy banks to grab onto more walls

and/or grappling hook points, and mostly find herself starting and ending at the same point to any raiding opportunity, with environments handily somehow funnelling Kay's raiding in a nice neat circle. What are the chances of that happening, right?

KAY SHOT FIRST

Don't mistake me, though. I feel *Star Wars: Outlaws* is at its best when it's letting Kay do what Kay does best, stealing stuff. Sneaking around, traversing often spectacular environments, planning how best to overcome a puzzle or obstacle, and grabbing the golden goodie all feel really nice in this game. The problem is that, *Outlaws* inevitably falls into some of the same traps that Crystal Dynamics' *Tomb Raider* did, and most notably of those is what happens when Kay is forced to fight.

Suddenly, Kay Vess, regular space scoundrel, is gunning down the Empire's finest left, right and centre like the galaxy's most lethal assassin, and she's doing so with shooting mechanics that just don't feel that satisfying. But, hey, at least we've now got a blueprint for the inevitable open-world *Tomb Raider* game. ■



“Tying all three games together is an excellent (if plunderific) soundtrack”

Dying dozens of DOS-styled ways in the freeware **CURSED** trilogy

Not entirely sure what I expected, putting a set of batteries into an obviously haunted doll, but my curious hubris was rewarded by a violent death within the inventory screen, normally a safe space away from *Cursed 2*'s roaming ghouls and ghosts. I wasn't even mad. Clever scares are exactly what I'm looking for in a horror game. All the more impressive that it came from a rough and crusty-looking DOS-styled freeware adventure.

Developed by Disaster Squad productions – one-man studio Paul Tokach – you could be forgiven for overlooking the original *Cursed*. Developed in just one week in 2009, it was a charming enough ‘my first game’ project. A first-person horror point-and-click adventure tribute to the likes of *Shadowgate*, but with a chunky, MSPaint-ish pixel art look and a smattering of simple arcade combat. A cute curiosity with some smart surprises and jumpscares.

A decade later, Tokach resurfaced with an excellent sequel. *Cursed 2*'s art was better, the mechanics were

▶ DOMINIC TARASON



THIS MONTH
Died a hundred
DOS-styled deaths.

ALSO PLAYED
Cavalry Girls, *Granblue*
Fantasy: Relink

vastly more complex, including *Punch Out!!*-inspired combat with melee and guns, plus some basic RPG elements. Playing out across a much larger, less linear scale, you navigate a near-abandoned haunted town by car, occasionally defending it from road-roaming monsters and navigating dungeon-like labyrinths on foot. If you can handle its fiddly interface, *Cursed 2*'s a great bit of ‘outsider art’ game-dev in action.

THREE IS A MAGIC NUMBER

Cursed 3 is where everything clicks – easy to recommend without

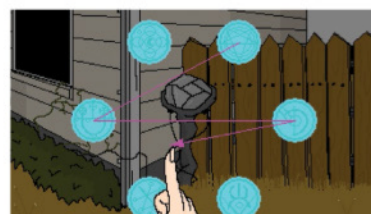
PART POINT-AND-CLICK ADVENTURE, PART RESIDENT EVIL 4

provisos or reservations. First released in 2023 and finalised in a ‘director’s cut’ style update recently, it’s a great, lengthy survival horror ride. Part point-and-click adventure, part *Resident Evil 4*, Splatterhouse vibes and a cool glyph-drawing spellcasting system. The DOS-style aesthetic holds true, but the art is genuinely good within its confines.

Tying all three games together is an excellent (if plunderific) soundtrack. Tokach is many things, but not a composer, so he borrowed (with full credit) tracks from a wide variety of sources, including *Castlevania* and the *Doom* series, and they’re all expertly used. Nothing feels out of place as tension is built and, as *Cursed 3* reaches its cathartic power-trip peak, released with gusto.

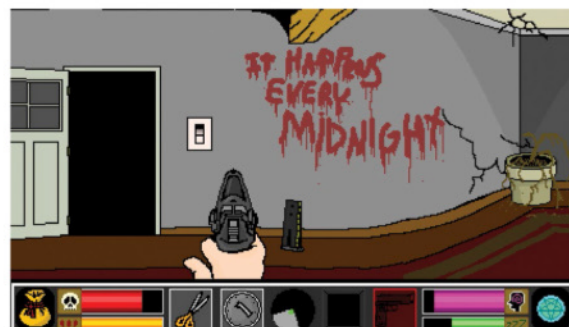
While the trilogy may have concluded with *Cursed 3*, I’ve still got one last serving of this to look forward to: An expanded remake of the first game is due sometime next year. I’m already eager to die again to its familiar and fresh creepy-crawlies.

The *Cursed* trilogy is free on Steam. Alternatively, find them at disastersquad.itch.io. Perfect for a long, dark Halloween night. ■



FAR LEFT: No, you cannot borrow my copy of PC Gamer magazine.

BELOW: Environmental storytelling straight out of *Dead Space*.





The art style, music and writing work wonderfully together.

“Yuv onle got vegan sausage rolls? ‘Ad rather shit t’bed”

Crossing Yorkshire on a mission to fill meat pies, in **THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE HERE!**

Other than the usual ‘finding work and starting a family’, moving from the north to the south of England has been a 17-year challenge to find just one decent meat and potato pie. Cornish pasties just don’t cut the mustard, and chains such as Greggs won’t admit accountability (despite frequently allowing pigeons to wander into their premises). Over the past two decades I’ve had no other choice than to purchase and transport meat and potato pies across multiple county lines.

It is with tremendous enthusiasm then, I discover the game *Thank Goodness You’re Here!* and get to play out my pie-craving lifetime side-mission in this joyful indie slap-them-up.

You play as a small, yellow travelling salesman, charged with meeting the mayor in the bizarre and hilarious fictional Yorkshire town of Barnsworth. The game is a mixture of Viz, Wallace and Gromit,

JOHN STRIKE



THIS MONTH
Lost count of the total crotch-kicks in *Sharpe*.

ALSO PLAYED
Co-pilot on the M6.

and Carry On, generously seasoned with bum jokes and willy puns.

Between the mission where you get stuck in a pub’s beer-pipe, and the mission where you have to buy a portion of chips for a hungover cow, is the mission where you get trapped under a beef steak while sourcing meat for a pie shop owner.

Big Ron’s Big Pies trumpets the tagline: ‘give your wife the best’, but this particular Thursday Big Ron’s out of filling, and out of pies. Like the start of every mission, Big Ron

bellows, “Thank goodness you’re here,” before sending you off to Dan’s Hams to get meat. Going from shop to shop I stumble into Mother Megg’s Buttery Goods. “Wiv got no butter f’ut Chicken Bakes,” Megg tells a customer. “D’ya want a vegan sausage roll?” “Ad rather shit t’bed” the customer replies.

I reach Dan’s Hams and jump up onto the counter, where I’m instantly squashed under a slab of steak.

For the next few minutes the game slides into a surrealist puzzle within a puzzle, and the tone shifts to one of melancholy as I explore the slab of meat. Each sausage, burger and rump tells its own tale of woe before being swallowed up in the fleshy ground. Once all the cuts of meat have disappeared, a huge beefy mouth opens up (within the face of the butcher), and I hop in.

Back to ‘reality’ and I take the steaks back to Big Ron. Of course this is Barnsworth, so his oven then malfunctions creating a pie the full width of his shop window, and I have to break the crust to escape. My work here is done. Pass the Bisto! ■

THE GAME IS GENEROUSLY SEASONED WITH BUM JOKES AND WILLY PUNS

LETHAL COMPANY

A return to some explosive post-launch patches . *By Elie Gould*

I'm the ideal company employee. As soon as the ship lands, I'm off running toward the entrance or fire exit with no torch or weapon to weigh me down or take up precious item slots that could be used for scrap. I head in completely blind and race around, gathering as many shiny things as possible, like some demented magpie. Usually, I'm heading back to the ship with my stash before anyone else even sets foot in the interior. It's not much, but it's certainly honest work.

After taking my loot back to the ship, my strategy is to hang around transporting everything my crewmates find from the interior's entrance, all while skittishly preparing to take off and leave everyone behind at the first sign of danger. I may not be getting chased around by Coil-Heads or Brackens, but lugging around heavy scrap isn't easy. So when I heard that developer Zeekerss was adding a new tool that would halve the time and effort spent dragging cash registers and stop signs from point A to point B, I was pretty excited.

The item in question is the Cruiser, added in V55 back in early July – it's essentially just a van you can load all your scrap into and drive back and forth from the ship. It's fantastic in theory, but in practice the Cruiser is more lethal than anything else I've come across in this game. It costs 400 coins, which is not cheap. But I made the executive decision to spend every single penny on what I thought would be a revolutionary item – this was my first mistake.

RISKY BUSINESS

My second mistake was ordering the Cruiser on Assurance. The drop point on this moon is on a small precarious outcrop on a cliffside. It's tricky enough to get there by foot, so it was hardly surprising that the landing didn't go very well. After the shuttle dropped the vehicle off and I

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 23, 2023

DEVELOPER
Zeekerss

PUBLISHER
Zeekerss

LINK
shorturl.at/1BmdZ

managed to clamber inside, one of my crewmates accidentally pushed it off the side of the cliff, sending me rolling down the mountain.

The van ended up upside-down (because that's just my luck), but after turning it the right way up, I put my very limited knowledge of driving to the test in an effort to get the van and my team to the front entrance. It did not go well. Legally I can't drive a car, but I always thought that this was more of a formality than anything else. However, after failing to operate the gearstick for five minutes and finally getting the Cruiser wedged between two rock walls, I handed the role of driver over to one of my friends (our other crewmate was long since tired of our escapades and had opted to go and actually try to find some scrap).

But as I stepped out of the Cruiser, all I heard was a bang, and before I

knew it I was wedged between two rocks on the side of a neighbouring cliff. To say I was confused is an understatement. For a short time I thought I was dead, but after seeing my friend's lifeless, charred corpse flop to the floor, I scrambled down the cliffside, picked them up, and stumbled back to the ship, leaving the fiery wreckage behind me.

I waited for our other crewmate to return with a couple of pieces of scrap before gingerly explaining what had happened and how my ingenious idea to invest in a Cruiser may have backfired on us, literally. Honestly, I still don't know what happened or what went wrong, but I do know that we won't be investing



I STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED OR WHAT WENT WRONG

in another Cruiser any time soon. Luckily, we somehow managed to make our first few scrap quotas, and the save file we started is still going strong. Although the newest monster, the Bog Crawler, can certainly be a cause for concern.

The first time I came across it, I thought it was a random baby someone had left in the depths of an abandoned facility because it was just so tiny and relentlessly crying (in hindsight, I should definitely have known better). Luckily, I'm great with kids, and if there's one thing I know you should always do, it's shake the baby until it stops crying. This trick worked for a while, but as soon as I stopped paying attention to it, the Bog Crawler transformed into a horrendous beast that hunted my team and I down. It killed all of us in no time at all.

The Bog Crawler definitely put a dent in our scrap quota, but it wasn't anything a couple of dozen clown horns couldn't fix, thanks to them being ridiculously well-priced by the company. So, if I could give you just a bit of advice if you haven't ventured into *Lethal Company* since update v50, it would be never to stop looking after the baby, invest in the horn economy, and obviously make sure there's someone responsible behind the wheel at all times. Or even better, don't invest in the van unless you all have a death wish. ■

WHEEL BREAKER

Putting the 'lethal' in *Lethal Company*

1%
INTENTIONAL
CAR CRASHES

99%
UNINTENTIONAL
CAR CRASHES

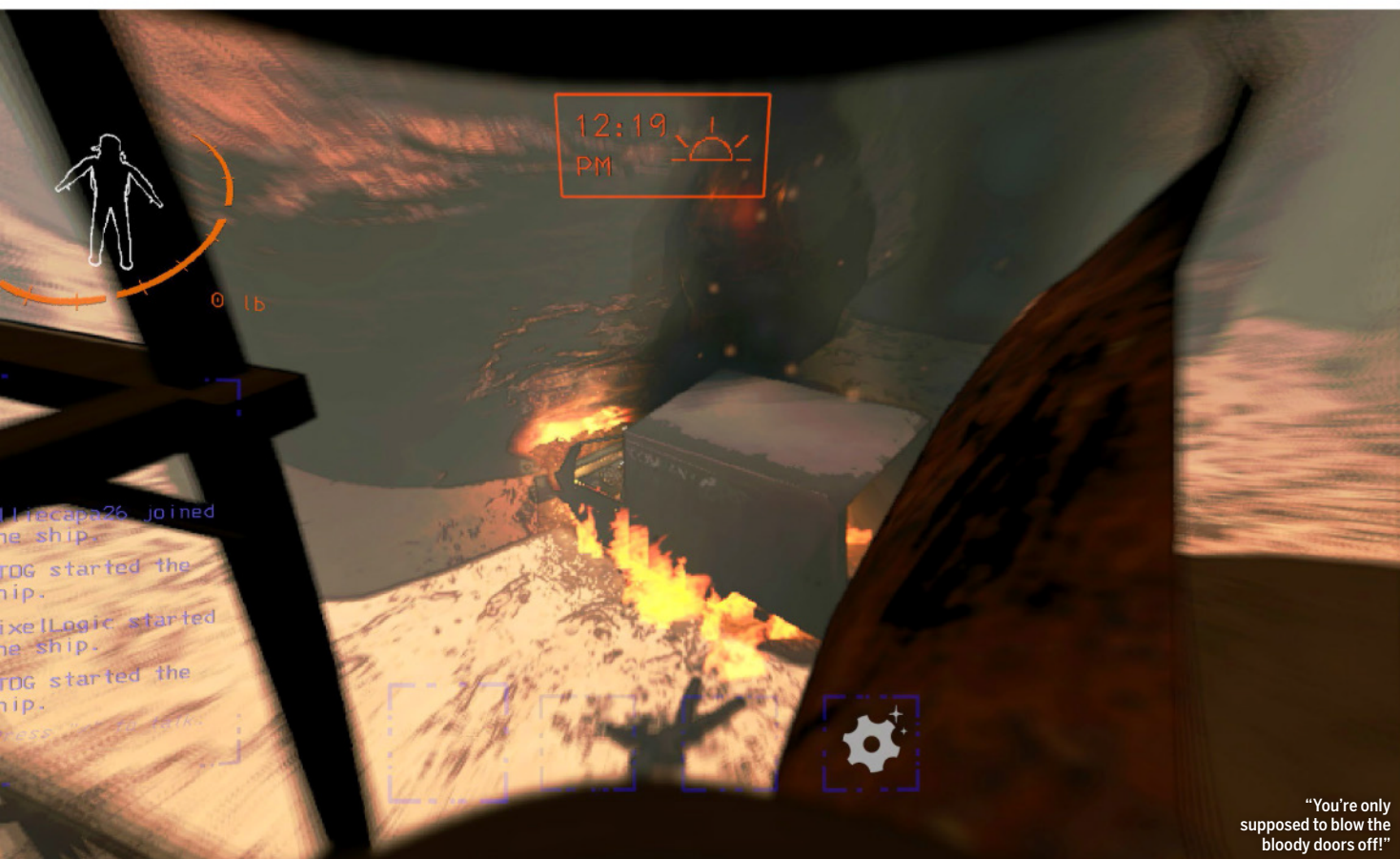




The aftermath of an explosive first drive (see my friend's charred remains in the corner).



ABOVE: The Cruiser precariously balancing on the edge of a cliff.



"You're only supposed to blow the bloody doors off!"



The roster hack turns this screen into a stadium.

MARVEL: ULTIMATE ALLIANCE

Enter the multiverse of modness. *By Justin Wagner*

Superhero fatigue? We've all felt it. Marvel's star-studded roadmap of blockbuster movies and videogames has no end in sight, and you had better get used to the cape and cowl if you don't want to miss out. My issue is, Marvel can never resist bringing out the big guns. It's all Wolverine, Spider-Man, Captain America – yawn. Where's my *Diablo*-lite APRG where I can play as my favourite comic book hero, mustachioed SHIELD agent Dum Dum Dugan?

Never mind, I found it. *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* had a healthy lineup of 23 playable characters when Raven Software released it in 2006, and the novelty of building your own Marvel team-up in couch co-op helped the game score a cult following despite it being otherwise

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 24, 2006

DEVELOPER
Raven Software

PUBLISHER
Activision

LINK
marvelmods.com

unexceptional. But the Marvel Mods forum community is astir like 2006 never ended, and 18 years of active modding have taken that modest roster of 23 to a whopping 700 and counting, turning the original game into an unparalleled monument celebrating comic book heroes from the mainstream to the obscure.

But don't take it from me; take it from my world-saving superhero team, Earth's Alrightiest Heroes, consisting of Fantomex, Iron Fist, Silver Samurai, and of course, Dum Dum Dugan. I'll never see these guys hanging out together on a silver screen or a spinner rack, but I thought they were badass when I



Ever thought Spidey needed more guns?

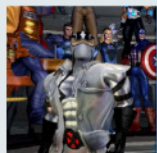
EVERYONE IS HERE!

Who even are these heroes?



SILVER SAMURAI

Like a samurai, but silver. He beats up Wolverine by having metal on the outside of his body.



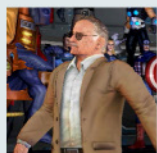
FANTOMEX

His nervous system is externalised as a supercomputer called EVA. I don't know what that means either.



IRON FIST

Before the TV show he was known as Luke Cage's friend with moves like Twin Dragon Punch.



STAN LEE

Stan has Gamma Smash, Uni-Beam and Web Bullet powers. Just like he did in real life.

was 12, and that was all that mattered when putting this gang together.

My foray into *Ultimate Alliance* modding began with a community cornerstone: a series of roster hacks which expand the number of selectable characters to 50, called *The Holy F**kin' Grail!*. The plainest (and built-in) application of these mods is to give yourself access to the various exclusive characters that were tied to ports and re-releases, like Mar-Vell and the Hulk. Then I got hooked on the forum's 'official character pack' which mods in X-Men oddities such as Toad and Pyro, and started perusing the larger catalogue of admin-endorsed additions, which collects 700+ mods and includes the likes of Jack of Hearts, Sugar Man and somehow, Uncle Ben.

ORIGIN STORY

When I saw the gargantuan selection of fan-made characters I assumed they were mostly reskins or clever rearrangements of assets, and a lot of them are. The US Agent and War Machine mods take two skins for Captain America and Iron Man and turn them into their own characters with bespoke moves, so you can have Rhodey and Tony fight side-by-side with a few changes to differentiate them. Similarly, the MODOK mod borrows its model and VFX from a boss fight with the giant floating head himself, which is fair enough, even if it means he can't fit through doors. But other mods import from other Raven Software games entirely, like the official character pack's version of Jean Grey, which ports her from *X-Men Legends 2* and reprises her ability to lift objects and enemies.

More ambitious still are additions like the Stan Lee tribute, Agent Venom, and Quicksilver, which build new characters from the ground up. While these characters tend to borrow existing animations and make use of existing VFX, the same can be said of the game's base roster. OK, Stan feels a little out of place because he was a real man and his in-game icon is a pixelated photograph, but you know what I mean.

Is Silver Samurai a little busted, dashing all over the screen and slicing people apart with a shadow clone? Is Agent Venom a bit ridiculous, swinging around like Spider-Man with half a dozen firearms ready to entrap the Avengers in a war crime investigation? Yes and

yes, but this sort of unrestrained wish-fulfilment is exactly what these mods are about.

Ultimate Alliance is no glossy blockbuster, and it doesn't need to be for these forum community mods to cut the mustard. It all captures the appeal of bashing action figures together and making sound effects with your mouth, and the work of mod forum mainstays like Outsider, Ceamonks890, and the late Canino gleams with passion you can only find in something this homegrown.

WITH GREAT POWER

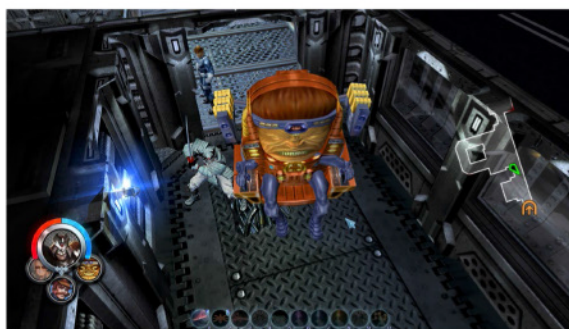
It takes some finagling to get these characters playable, and you'll need to be happy tinkering with the game files for it to recognise your additions, but there are robust community tools to make things easier. I was especially grateful for the forum's



YOU'LL NEED TO BE HAPPY TINKERING WITH THE GAME FILES

OpenHeroSelect tool which automates much of the busy work. I couldn't quite test all 700 characters aggregated by forum mods, but switching out the ones I sampled was a cinch once I had a feel for it.

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance still isn't a revelation in game design, and even stuffed with the best mods around, it's a bit of dispensable bad guy-bashing best experienced huddled around a TV with a bunch of other comic book nerds. What I loved about playing with these mods, though, is seeing how a humble game like *M:UA* could become such a long-standing lightning rod for people's ingenuity. *M:UA* and its sequel were delisted from digital storefronts six years ago, but there's still a thriving community that boots it up, sees Thanos isn't playable, and says "Fine, I'll do it myself". Do these mods spring up in the hundreds of thousands and overhaul the entire experience, like you might find for *Skyrim* or *Minecraft*? No, but the small and heroic community gathered around *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* has been thriving regardless for the last two decades, and I doubt they'll stop any time soon. ■



TOP: MODOK can't fit through doors. I guess I can't call it a design flaw.

RIGHT: Wait 'til Doom gets a load of the Sugar Man.





HOW TO GET STARTED IN STAR WARS OUTLAWS

Become the best thief in the galaxy. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
10 hours

VITAL LINKS

Tips: bit.ly/PCG_Outlaws_Tips/

Pyke Syndicate vault:
bit.ly/PCG_PSV_keycards



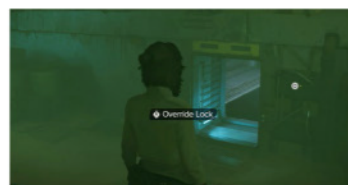
BET BIG

1 One of the best ways to make credits in *Star Wars Outlaws* is by betting on Fathier races. You'll encounter these on Canto Bight when Valek gives you a tip on a rigged race. Read the tip datapad, note the info, and use it to identify the winning Fathier.



BREAK THE BANK

2 Another way to get a lot of credits is by breaking into Syndicate vaults. These loot caches are concealed in most Syndicate districts and you can access them by acquiring three keycards. Make sure to hack the terminal in the vault room to get map markers for these.



BACKDOOR

3 When sneaking into restricted areas and Imperial bases, remember that there's almost always a secret way in. It might be a cliff passage that lets you grapple and swing in, or even just a vent that Nix can open, giving you access to an otherwise barred district.



QUIET APPROACH

4 It's fun to whip out your blaster and shoot it out with gang members, but you'll quickly find yourself being hunted down and with few friends. If you want to maintain a decent reputation with the factions, try being sneaky and don't get caught infiltrating their territory.



GETTING A REP

5 A good reputation is super important, since it gives you access to districts and outposts, along with new contracts, intel, and even Kessel Sabacc tables. If you need to infiltrate a restricted area, this is also easier with good rep.



LISTEN UP

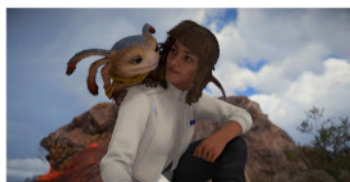
6 While exploring the cities and worlds of *Outlaws*, be sure to look for intel opportunities. This might be eavesdropping in the cantina or purchasing info from a random trader. These rumours will often lead you to stashed treasure.



DEAD OR ALIVE

7 If you tussle with the Empire or get caught you'll gain a wanted level. The higher this gets, the more fearsome enemies pursue you and generally interfere with your antics. You can remove your wanted level by finding an Imperial Terminal or a corrupt officer.

SABACC! *Master the criminal card game.*



WHO'S NIX?

8 Though Kay is the main character, Nix is the true star. This helpful critter can steal from a distance, push hard-to-reach switches, and even attack enemies. If you're ever stuck on a puzzle, the solution probably involves Nix, or just an upgrade you don't have yet.



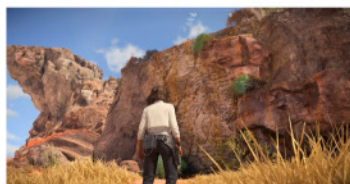
MAKING FRIENDS

9 You'll frequently be faced with choices where you have to choose to screw over one Syndicate or another. Fear not! These decisions are more about who you want to gain rep with. Simply choose based on the rep rewards and which faction you want to cosy up with.



PROFESSIONALS

10 Instead of a skill tree, *Outlaws* has a selection of characters known as Experts. You'll find some through the story and others in quest lines on different planets. Once you do, you'll be able to unlock new abilities via crafting and achieving the prerequisites.



IT'S A SIGN

11 If you want to search for climbing routes yourself you can remove the yellow paint from ledges by turning on explorer mode. However, it can often be quite tricky to locate the route up certain structures. If in doubt, look for a yellow sign indicating the right direction.



STORY MODE

12 Exploring early in the game is frequently blocked, whether by a wall you can't destroy yet or a grappling point that's too high. Progressing the story often gets you the necessary upgrades, so remember those spots for later.



FALLOUT 4: LUCKY BASTARD

PART 3

Revenge is a dish best
served...with milk?

By Rick Lane



This is my final entry in my attempt to play *Fallout 4* on Survival difficulty with a luck build, and so far I've experienced little in the way of either survival or luck. It's been a gruelling, merciless struggle to take even the smallest steps forward, to the point where I only completed a single quest in the previous entry. Anything that can kill me has done so dozens of times, with every battle carrying a precipitous risk of instant death that often costs me chunks of progress.

However, since we last strode out into the Commonwealth (and immediately trod on a landmine), I've been grinding away in the northeast of *Fallout 4*'s map to improve my fortunes. I solved the mystery of a missing trade caravan near the walled settlement of Covenant, successfully explored a federal compound crammed with raiders, and gave a bunch of mirelurks the runaround at the Irish Pride Shipyard building, among a bunch of other things.

All of which has left me, if not tougher, than at least a slightly more effective ambush predator. Alongside the glitzy perk like Idiot Savant and Mysterious Stranger, I can now save up two critical hits to use whenever I want, while V.A.T.S attacks can randomly refill my AP and critical meters. Although it seems unlikely that I'll finish the main story at this point, I hope I can at least give my character Phil Icitous an ending that befits him.

ROUGH TREATMENT

This month's escapades begin in earnest as I return to Diamond City from across the Charles River. My adventures in the Commonwealth have left me perilously low on water and medical supplies, so I plan to visit Diamond City's Doctor Sun and replenish both. As I pass through Cambridge, however, I spy the ruins of the Kendall Hospital. "Hospitals have medical supplies" my brain says, and unlike the real, allegedly not post-apocalyptic United States, any medical supplies I find inside will be free.

Hence, I decide to take a detour. I know that there will be enemies inside the hospital. But I figure they'll probably be raiders, who I can deal with in small

numbers. I'm quickly proved half-right. There are raiders inside, but substantially more than I anticipate. Hospitals, it turns out, are large, and the raiders have converted the centre of Kendall into a Mad Max shanty town.

Fighting through this small army of raiders is, shockingly, extremely difficult. But for once there are an abundance of beds in the building (another common feature of hospitals). This means I can save my progress regularly, and thereby digest the challenge in chunks. Not only do I fill my pockets with lovely, lifesaving drugs, I also rack up a fat wodge of XP. As I shotgun my way to the bottom of the shanty town, I'm feeling thoroughly

RAIDERS HAVE CONVERTED THE CENTRE OF KENDALL INTO A MAD MAX SHANTY TOWN

pleased with myself, right until I descend into the basement, and a Deathclaw lurches around a corner.

Now, I have already killed a deathclaw in this playthrough. But A) I was wearing power armour, B) I was positioned on a rooftop a hundred yards away, and C) the Deathclaw glitched out and couldn't attack me. So it's a bit like saying "I knocked out Tyson Fury" after hitting him with a Jeep. None of those factors are in play here. I don't even have any crits saved up, because I used them battling the raiders. I do try fighting it in the traditional manner (blasting it in the face with a shotgun) but I might as well be tickling its nose with a feather. Mere seconds into the fight, it picks me up and shreds me into human jerky.

Waking up in the last bed I slept at, I ponder the situation. I look for a perch I can snipe the deathclaw from, but the problem is it doesn't spawn until I drop into the basement, at which point I can't climb back out. I could try backtracking out of the hospital, but it's a long way. Besides, as I bravely backpedaled away from my vastly superior foe in the basement, I spied a power terminal with a fusion core inside it. Having one of those would be very handy, if I can deal with the giant mutant dinosaur guarding it.

I don't have any guns sufficient for dealing with a deathclaw, like a missile launcher or a Fat Man, because they're too heavy for me to carry. But cycling through my inventory, I notice I have two bottlecap mines and a Nuka grenade, all powerful, single-use weapons. If I used them all together, would the combined effect be enough to kill a deathclaw?

After significant trial and error (by which I mean 'violent deaths') I discover the answer to this question is 'no'. The deathclaw can withstand even this ferocious cocktail of explosives. However, they do sufficient damage that I can potentially finish the creature off with conventional weapons. It takes the best part of an hour to do

THE RULES

1. Play *Fallout 4* on Survival Difficulty

2. Only select luck perks (except if unavailable).

3. "Evil" choices. Being bad is more fun.



everything right, but eventually the monster drops dead at my feet, and I yell out loud in triumph.

I then have to do the whole process again because I forgot to take a screenshot. On the plus side, I discover that chucking a frag grenade into the mix kills the creature outright.

Killing a deathclaw up close and personal feels like a potential ending in and of itself. I never thought that would be possible at this difficulty with this build. But it's also got me thinking: if I can get through all those raiders and then kill a deathclaw, then maybe, just maybe, I'm finally capable of rescuing synth detective Nick Valentine.

MY BLOODY VALENTINE

To recap, Nick Valentine is the next step in Phil's journey to find his kidnapped son, but the synthetic sleuth is being held by a bunch of wannabe 1930s gangsters called the Triggermen in Boston's Park Street subway station. Last time I tried to rescue him, I couldn't even get through the entrance to the subway. Heck, I could barely get down the street to the subway station without being mauled by ghouls or raiders or knocked down by a strong breeze.

This time, the street proves no resistance, although I narrowly avoid being atomised by an exploding car. "That was lucky," I say as I watch the mushroom cloud from the car's nuclear engine billow from down the road. I then burst out laughing, realising it's the first time this entire playthrough that I have said or thought that.

When I get to the subway, not only do I make it through the entrance, I completely ice the four goons guarding it. This is thanks partly to several well-placed crits from my hunting rifle, and partly to the 10mm autopistol I picked up in the hospital, which finally lets me dish out damage faster than I take it in a standup gunfight.

This is only the start, however. The mission to rescue Valentine is long, with lots of hairy gunfights. I die a lot, and when I'm not dying I'm pressed up against a subway wall, tommy-gun fire spattering off the tiles inches from my face. Thankfully, though, the angles are just generous enough, and the bedrolls just frequent enough, for me to pick my way to and through Vault 114, hidden in the

LUCK PERKS REVISITED

A retrospective ranking of the best (and worst) Luck perks



WINNER
CRITICAL BANKER
Triggering crits at will has saved my life more than any other Luck perk. Still not enough to stop me dying constantly, but it is very helpful.



RUNNER-UP
IDIOLOG SAVANT
Idiot Savant's XP bonuses are handy when you're useless at everything, and the perk is easily exploitable through repetitive tasks.



PERSONAL BEST
MYSTERIOUS STRANGER
While a little too random to rely on, the Stranger's appearances are often helpful and always entertaining.



DNF
RICOCHET
Bullets bouncing back to kill their enemies sounds like an instant winner. But the fact it only triggers at low health is next to useless.

subway. I free Valentine from his cage, and fight with him all the way to a showdown with the gang leader, Skinny Malone.

Here's where I hit another potential roadblock. Skinny is almost as tough as a deathclaw, and he's flanked by his girlfriend Darla and one of his goons. Fortunately, the fight is pre-empted by a long conversation between Skinny and Nick, long enough for me to slip behind the gangsters and lay a couple of frag mines. The second the fight starts, the mines explode, killing Darla and the henchman, and leaving Skinny wounded enough that a critical headshot from my hunting rifle puts him down. Once the smoke clears, Nick and I beat a swift retreat, heading back to his digs in Diamond City.

CEREAL KILLER

With Nick rescued, I'm finally beginning to feel like luck is turning in my favour. But Fallout 4's Survival difficulty is still riddled with lethal potential, as I soon discover when I almost die because someone gives me a hat.

That someone is Valentine's secretary, who rewards me for rescuing the PI with a detective outfit and a trilby. But the latter nudges my inventory weight over the

encumbrance limit, and when you become overencumbered on Survival difficulty, you take periodic damage. I fail to notice this, sitting down for a long chat with Nick about my missing son. Cue several minutes of my character going "Urgh, oof, argh!" as he goes over the kidnapping and subsequent murder of his wife. When I finally stand up, I discover that both my legs are broken. This makes it impressive Phil stood up at all, but it also costs me a Stimpak to fix.

Hat incident aside, rescuing Valentine feels like a fitting spot to wrap things up, as it confirms that playing Survival with a luck build is possible, if never comfortable. But the next mission puts me on the trail of Kellogg, the mercenary who murdered

BELOW: 'Luxury' Vault 114. Heh heh heh.





WITH MY SOUPED-UP LUCK PERKS AND VALENTINE AT MY SIDE, THINGS GO EASIER

Phil's wife. I can't let things go without at least getting some vengeance.

Kellogg is holed up at a place called Fort Hagan, which we take a roundabout route to as Dogmeat sniffs it out. Taking such a long journey with no save points is, uh, tense. But we arrive at Fort Hagan without any major incidents. The building itself is jam-packed with Synths, which I know from sore experience can kick my organic arse. But with my souped-up luck perks and Valentine at my side, things go considerably easier. I even kill a 'Legendary' level Synth with a single critical headshot. Although I'm still very much a glass cannon, it's finally starting to feel like there is as much cannon as there is glass.

Eventually, we make it to the big showdown with Kellogg, where I quickly discover I have no chance whatsoever of beating him. He can take a truly immense amount of damage and one shot me instantly. I try the mine trick I used on Skinny Malone, but all I discover is that mines are even better than hats at ruining my legs.

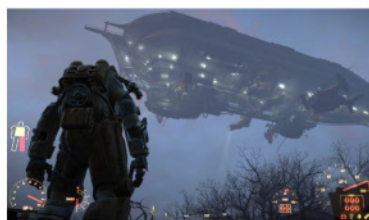
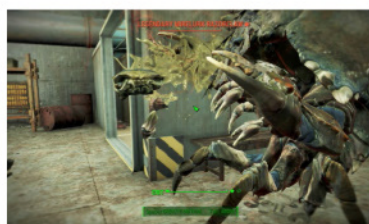
No amount of good fortune is

going to get me through this fight. But sometimes, you have to make your own luck. I might lack for skill and toughness, but I do have one fusion core and, because I haven't spent any of it due to my puny carrying capacity, quite a lot of money. So I trek all the way back across the wasteland to fetch my power armour, and then lug it all the way to diamond city, where I buy myself a nice new missile launcher (which I can carry thanks to the power armour) and then go all the way back to Fort Hagan, where, after several attempt and the addition of a Nuka grenade, I finally blow Kellogg out of his bowl.

Here, with Kellogg lying dead at Phil's feet, is where we must leave things. I started this diary because I wanted to squeeze as much roleplaying fun out of Fallout 4 as I could. I'm not wholly sure I've succeeded in this goal – Fallout 4's roleplaying systems are just too scaled

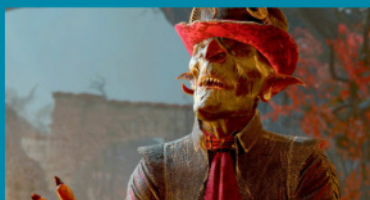
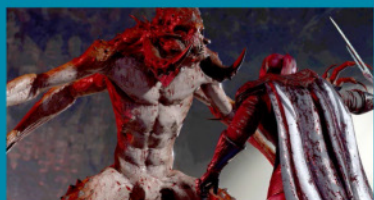
back to truly express yourself, particularly when it comes to being a rotter. But as an open world action game, it has raised in my estimations. Despite everything, I don't regret playing it on Survival difficulty. While it's harder than a concrete Calippo, it also forces you to engage with the game's systems in a more thorough fashion, and puzzling my way out of some scenarios it's thrown at me has been deeply gratifying. I'm not sure I'd restrict myself to a luck build next time, however. As I've discovered to my pain, luck runs two ways, and up until about level 25, it's all bad. ■

ABOVE: Kellogg might talk tough, but make a breakfast joke and he'll sob like a baby.



BALDUR'S GATE III'S DARK URGE

The best amnesiac RPG protagonist ever. *By Ted Litchfield*



ABOVE: My Durge was a half-orc Assassin/Vengeance Paladin.

LEFT: Did I mention you have a goblin butler who tempts you to commit murders?



I'm always a squishy nice guy in RPGs. Even when my character's some kind of badass dual-dagger edgelord, I always approach them as more of a rebellious scamp than a remorseless killer. So when Larian showed a player origin for *Baldur's Gate III* who would bite companions and kick squirrels, I didn't think it was for me.

But then I saw the game's lead writer, Adam Smith, describe The Dark Urge (affectionately called Durge by fans) as potentially having the "most heroic" story arc in the game, and that got my mind racing. Whether you want to be a sicko fantasy Francis Dolarhyde freak, a noble hero resisting their heritage, or something in-between, The Dark Urge offers one of the richest, most satisfying ways to play *Baldur's Gate III*, as well as an impressive advancement of Larian's origin character system. If it needs to be said: Spoilers ahead for *Baldur's Gate III*.

RE-ROLL

Starting in *Divinity: Original Sin 2*, Larian has offered what it calls 'origin characters'. Instead of playing as a blank slate, you can choose to be one of the game's companions. *Original Sin 2*'s strict four-person party made being an origin character a no-brainer – you'd be missing out on some of the story if you made your own guy – but being able to rotate your squad in and out of *Baldur's Gate III*'s party camp, as well as its more extensive customisation options, make playing as Lae'zel or Gale more of a niche choice.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 3, 2023

DEVELOPER
Larian Studios

PUBLISHER
Larian Studios

LINK
baldursgate3.game

INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS

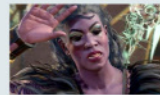
Some of the worst Durge crimes.



SQUIRREL KICK
Most players have the option of kicking wee Timber, but Durges have no choice but to punt the little bugger.



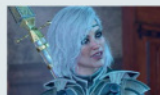
HAND BITE
'Fantasise' about biting Gale's hand in his intro scene, and you'll actually do it, and then he won't join your party.



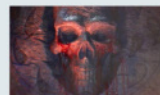
DRAMA
Through dialogue options or barks, Durge is always going on and on about the impending death of all things.



BARD BASH
Setting the tone for the rest of the game, the Durge will brutally murder the Bards Alfira or Quil Grootslag in Act 1.



CLERIC KILL
The Durge's big quest for Act 2 is to betray both factions, killing Isobel and throwing the story off its rails.



OMNICIDE
Make it to the end of the game as a loyal, evil Durge, and the results don't look pretty for the Forgotten Realms.

Durge gets the best of both worlds: you can fully customise your avatar while still getting a starting point for your roleplaying. And though at one point conceived as a set origin companion like the rest of the cast, if you don't choose it The

YOU'RE BASICALLY GETTING AN EXTRA STORY, WITH VERY LITTLE DOWNSIDE

Dark Urge will only appear in your game as a figure in the backstory and a corpse late in the campaign. You're basically getting an extra story when you play as the Durge, with very little downside – except for the much darker tone of the game.

EAT THIS KITTEN

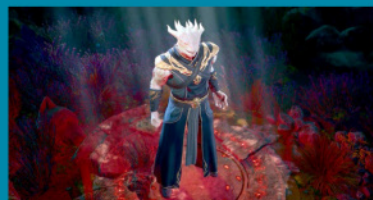
Baldur's Gate III becomes suffused with all kinds of nasty voice lines,

brutal new choices and even some pretty funny dialogue options – I enjoyed being able to bemoan my urge to kill and visions of an ocean of blood in response to Halsin making small talk about our phobias.

Leaning into this nastiness makes for the bleakest, most capital-E Evil way of playing *Baldur's Gate III*, and ends with the probable death of all living things. But that's what makes being a good-guy Durge so satisfying: There are real stakes, and the game is often pushing you towards evil.

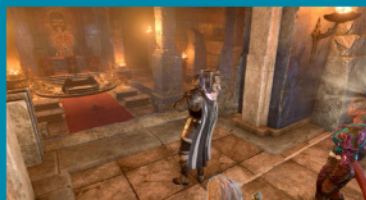
Take the innocent Bard, Alfira: a crucial Act 1 scene forces you to kill this recurring secondary character, with no chance of resisting once it's in motion. In normal playthroughs, she shows up throughout the game, developing a relationship with another Tiedling refugee and even providing one of the best spellcaster robes in the game. Her death has huge stakes, and is nigh-unavoidable. Taking advantage of some nonlethal attack shenanigans and Larian's unique way of tracking NPCs can potentially save Alfira's life, though. Your Durge will still brutally kill the similarly-charming (but less plot-critical) stand-in, Quil Grootslag, but managing to keep Alfira alive on a Durge playthrough feels like such an achievement given its difficulty and supposed inevitability.

As a huge fan of the original *Baldur's Gate* games, The Dark Urge provides a fantastic throughline to that story – you're a Bhaalspawn just like the protagonist of those games, with the adventure culminating in a showdown with one of your siblings in the city of Baldur's Gate, just like the original game. I just love how Larian made something that feels so essential, so critical to the plot of the game into an optional choice, and at the time of writing, I'm eagerly planning my next Durge playthrough, with only the promise of *Baldur's Gate III*'s long-awaited Patch 7 holding me back. ■



LEFT: Despite being a silent protagonist, Durge gets a great opening soliloquy.

RIGHT: Time to hang out with your uncle, who ran for mayor 100 years ago and almost started a war.





THIEF GOLD

Learning to forgive myself for knocking out every single guard. *By Ted Litchfield*

For 15 years, I've felt like a fake immersive sim fan. My relationship with *Thief*, one of the earliest imm-sims and PC stealth games, resembled the stereotype of an adult trying to finally finish that copy of *Moby Dick* they keep by the bed: I kept *Thief* and its sequel, *The Metal Age*, permanently installed, would try to begin a new playthrough of one or the other every few years, and I'd always stall out somewhere in the campaign, usually about a quarter of the way through. I've developed a history, love, and nostalgia for *Thief* and *Thief 2*, but I've never rolled credits on either – until now.

After gelling with New Blood's *Thief*-inspired sneaker, *Gloomwood*, and finding myself enticed by the

release of the wildly ambitious *Thief Gold* fan campaign, *The Black Parade* (read more in Rick Lane's issue 388 Mod Spotlight), I figured it was now or never. I declared The Summer of *Thief*, and endeavoured to find my inner infiltrator, presumably a neighbour to my inner child.

STAY GOLD

My Summer of *Thief* began with *Thief Gold*, the 1999 updated version of *The Dark Project* that outmoded the initial release. At this point, I know mission one, Lord Bafford's Manor, about as well as I do my own childhood home after so many playthrough attempts over the years. Even so, it's still magic, one of the best first levels in any videogame that effortlessly introduces the player to everything that makes *Thief* special.

Thief nails this sense of being an interloper, a simultaneously cosy

and surreal experience of creeping through a beautifully-appointed home that isn't your own. Whether you're out on the city streets at a mission's start or waiting in a convenient patch of shadows for a guard to pass, *Thief* delivers the uniquely lonely, dare I say liminal, feeling of being home alone at night, or stepping outside to let your dog out and not seeing another soul around.

Though these levels are populated, the guards and servants feel like neither friends nor foes – you're a voyeur, a ghost, observing them and doing your best to stay out

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
1998

DEVELOPER
Looking Glass Studios

PUBLISHER
Eidos

LINK
gog.com/en/game/thief_gold



of their way. Even with spiritual successors like *Dishonored* or *Gloomwood*, there is nothing else in games that quite matches *Thief's* sense of uncanny loneliness. Eric Brosius' legendary sound design is a big part of that, with stifling ambient noise cut by the footsteps and muttering of distant rent-a-cops.

Thief punches above its weight graphically as well: on one level, these games look like butt, their scrungly, early 3D-accelerated polygons making them a hard sell to

friends who haven't already bought into the retro graphics craze. But despite that caveat, *Thief* and *Thief 2* are two of the most visually striking, beautiful games I've ever played, with their garish, baroque interiors sharply contrasting with all the opaque shadows and helping contribute to the uncanny feeling I prize in these games.

BLACKJACK SUMMER

The real test was the second level, Break From Cragcleft Prison, where

EXPERT DIFFICULTY GIVES YOU MORE AND MORE CHALLENGING OBJECTIVES

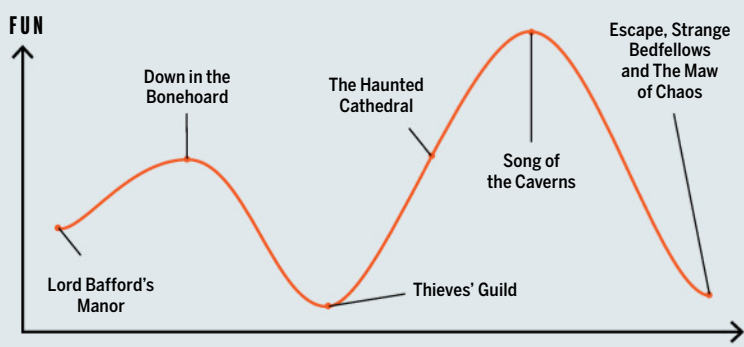
TOP: The universal *Thief* moment: a guard emerges from the shadows of a sumptuous, low-poly, 17th-century interior.

most of my playthroughs withered on the vine. It's a great, imaginative mission: a combined prison break/heist on a penitentiary built over a haunted mine, but it's also a big difficulty spike over Bafford's Manor. The first portion of the level, the mines, is twisty, confusing, and full of difficult-to-kill zombies – a controversial foe among *Thief* fans. Higher difficulties, meanwhile, require you to trek back through the entire level while carrying an unconscious associate.

I finally came to grips with the tension of *Thief*: it is best enjoyed on its highest difficulty level, Expert, but it's still OK to be bad at it. Rather than improving guards' AI detection or increasing the amount of damage you take, *Thief's* Expert difficulty gives you more and more challenging objectives, sometimes even opening up entire areas of the map that will otherwise be sealed off. Expert is the true *Thief* experience, the most *Thief* for your buck.

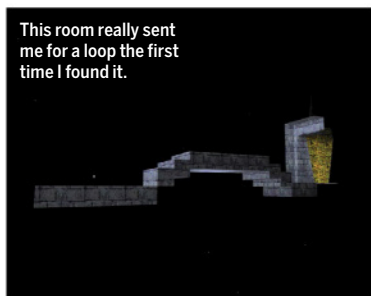
FUN TIMES?

Charting my enjoyment of *Thief Gold*





This room really sent me for a loop the first time I found it.



These objectives – which also almost always include finding an escape route once you're done – mean you'll be spending more time on each level and introduce a game over for killing any human enemies. That sounds tough, and not being able to kill anyone limits your options when caught, but I still found it liberating to let myself be 'bad' at *Thief* – playing on Expert doesn't mean you have to be an expert. Compared to the highly skilled players I like to watch on YouTube, who will 'ghost' through maps without leaving a trace, I play ugly.

Garrett's handy blackjack allows for an instant nonlethal KO from behind, and I often found myself clearing high traffic areas of guards sight-unseen, piling up their bodies in some shady corner to make sure nobody finds them sleeping on the job. And even if I got caught out on Expert mode, the flashbang item lends a few get out of jail free cards per mission, stunning enemies and leaving them prime for a blackjack knockout even if they've already been alerted. In addition to having trouble navigating *Thief's* sprawling levels, I think I always let myself get infected by this feeling I was playing the game 'wrong', resorting to

quicksave/quickload abuse to maintain perfect stealth instead of just knocking guys out and occasionally messing up. Learning to love *Thief* despite being bad at it helped me finally roll credits on *Gold*.

FUNDEAD

Now for the zombie in the room:

ABOVE: This hidden de_rats-style zone was a real treat to find.

Received wisdom from the fan community always seemed to hold that *Thief 2* was the superior game because it prioritised infiltration above all else, skipping the first game's digressions into haunted tombs and a monster-filled underground city. I gotta say I'm one of a growing number of *Thief* revisionists: the undead-focused levels, with some caveats, kick ass.

A lot of the hate has to do with how the undead and monsters behave differently to your standard guards: They're less predictable, and the zombies especially can show up in such volume that it's hard to sneak by them. Additionally, the zombie enemies can only be killed by infusing your arrows with holy water via a limited, temporary buff. This leads to a very different rhythm than *Thief's* usual gameplay, but I found myself digging it – break up your creeping and sneaking with some resource-restricted, avoidance-heavy, classic survival horror buoyed by *Thief's* impeccable atmosphere.

Down in the Bonehord and The Haunted Cathedral are the clear winners in my book. The former is a claustrophobic descent through tombs and tunnels that opens up into a dizzying necropolis with

TERRIBLE TAFFERS

What makes a Thief guard tick?

- 1 "What was that? Must've been rats..."
- 2 Invented slang like "taffer," which seems to mean "dummy".
- 3 Strict adherence to patrol routes.
- 4 That helmet is entirely for show.
- 5 Godlike fencing skills.





There are some cool sights in the last mission, even if it is a bit of a wash.

various puzzles to solve. Rather than exploring the titular parish in The Haunted Cathedral, you explore the abandoned district around it. The Haunted Cathedral is probably my favourite 'city streets' level in the series, with multiple paths through and a great variety of optional zones like a haunted mansion and some bugman caves under the sewers.

I think the undead missions get a bad rap from Return to the Cathedral later in the game. It's got a fantastic horror atmosphere and brings some interesting ideas, but needs about 40% fewer zombies, more sources of zombie-slaying holy water, and/or less backtracking. Your mission goals come from the winking, playful ghost of a long-dead friar who refuses to acknowledge the strangeness of everything going on as he sends you scuttling back and forth across the map in pursuit of the means to finally put him and his friends to rest. It's a great bit that undercuts the tension in a fun way, but wears out its welcome.

And of course, the less said about *Thief 1*'s last three missions, the better. Escape!, Strange Bedfellows and The Maw of Chaos are cramped

THE MISSION THEN BECOMES A CLASSICO-STYLE HEIST ON HER CONCERT HALL

little dungeon romps overstuffed with supernatural creatures. They're much shorter and more linear than most missions in the game, but feel twice as long. It's a sour note to end on, and honestly *Thief Gold* might have been a missed opportunity to clean up, consolidate, or otherwise revamp them.

MY FAVOURITE SONG

I've been enjoying my playthrough of *Thief 2: The Metal Age*, but I feel like I've already seen the peak of the series, at least outside the fan mission scene. Song of the Caverns, designed by prolific developer and voice actor Terri Brosius of SHODAN fame, hits every note I want to see in a *Thief* level, with an amazingly imaginative concept and sense of whimsy that still brings a smile to my face.

You start out thinking it's another monster or undead-focused level, with the briefing directing you to find a shrine with a magic runestone hidden in the tunnels

under the city. The twist? The wealthy owner of a nearby opera house already beat you to the punch, her guards having pocketed the artefact while exterminating the various creatures that threatened her property. The mission then becomes a classico-style heist on her concert hall, one of the most striking and memorable rich guy playgrounds in the series, with the central theatre anchoring a labyrinth of sumptuous rooms to stalk through. One of my favourite little details is a basement ballet warm-up room full of performers getting ready for the big show.

And Song of the Caverns really encapsulates something I love about *Thief 1* that's somewhat lost in its sequel. *The Dark Project/Gold* certainly has rougher edges, but its experimental, "see what sticks" design consistently managed to surprise and delight me more than the generally higher quality bar in *The Metal Age*. Regardless, I'm just glad to have finally found my groove with classic *Thief*, and once I wrap up the final few levels of *The Metal Age*, I can finally see what all the hubbub is about with last year's much lauded fan campaign, *The Black Parade*. ■

KARA PHILLIPS



From facing Nordic horrors and culling monsters to running cults and slinging lassos, I'm forever delving into realities far from my own and forcing everyone around me to do the same.

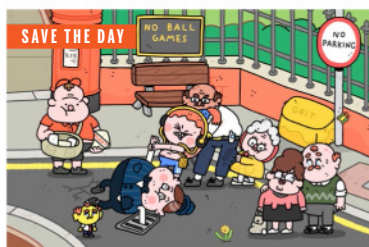


OUTLAWS FOR LIFE

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption2

→ As part of one of the most infamous gangs of outlaws, you need to lie, cheat and steal your way through America while deciding whether or not to trust your own ideas or stay loyal to the gang that raised you. I've never cried so much while playing a game.

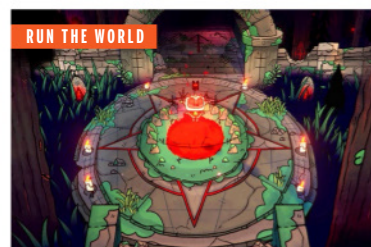


SAVE THE DAY

THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE HERE!

thankgoodness.game

→ In the curious town of Barnsworth a series of incredibly odd jobs are waiting to be completed. It'll make you laugh, it'll make you grimace, it's basically its own sketch show in videogame format. I've never been up north, but I imagine it's exactly like *Thank Goodness You're Here!*



RUN THE WORLD

CULT OF THE LAMB

cultofthelamb.com

→ If I was saved from slaughter, the first thing I'd do is start my own cult and seek revenge on those who tried to kill me. If you think the same, you'd probably love *Cult of the Lamb*. Plus, you get to enslave adorable woodland animals to do your bidding while you're out slaying heretics.



TAKE EM DOWN

MONSTER HUNTER RISE

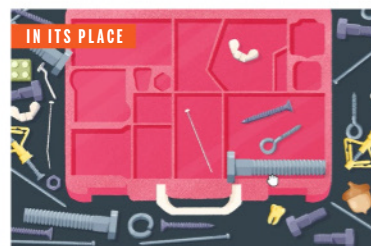
monsterhunter.com/rise

→ Big weapons, bigger monsters, and now an insatiable craving for dango made by cats, *Monster Hunter Rise* has it all. I've spent hundreds of hours being thrown across the map by beasts, but no matter how many times I get knocked down I will never stop getting up again.

MUST
PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Kara Phillips



IN ITS PLACE

A LITTLE TO THE LEFT

maxinferno.com

→ No one likes tidying. But *A Little to the Left* makes me like organising things. I strongly believe that's because I get rewarded for finding new fun ways to keep things neat. Maybe if I was given a gold star each time I tidied up I wouldn't struggle to find my glasses every morning.



CHAOS INCARNATE

JUST CROW THINGS

unboundcreations.com/games/crowy

→ I love birds so much I've often thought about what life would be like as one. Luckily *Just Crow Things* lets me emulate the experience by ruining the days of innocent bystanders through pooping on their heads and stealing shiny things. I could just do this in real life, actually.



NEW TERRORS

BRAMBLE: THE MOUNTAIN KING

dimfroststudio.com/bramble

→ In a world of Nordic fables, you're a child on a desperate search for his sister. You'll come up against some of the most horrendous monsters I've seen in horror games, but maybe that's because it taps into the childhood fear of never knowing what's lurking in the dark.



KNEE PADS NOT REQUIRED

SESSION: SKATE SIM

session-skatesim.com

→ I've got a skateboard in a cupboard somewhere that's been collecting dust for years. I'm scared of hurting my ankles or knees if I get it out again. I don't mind ragging around my character in *Session: Skate Sim* in true Hall of Meat style though, and you best believe I can land a heelflip.



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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE LAST GOOD KILLSTREAK** [PART 3]

I don't know about angels, but it's fear that gives men wings. So when the formerly alcoholic bulldog named Dogulus Rift, who I'd adopted after getting his old drinking buddy Peter Molyneux back on his feet, lunged at Betty Sue and sank his teeth into her arm, I felt death's creeping grip and knew it was time to fly.

The CGC operative who'd survived the previous gunfight, distracted by his boss' cry of agony, was therefore too late as I threw myself at his waist, taking him down. Blood dripping down my shirt, I landed a huge right hook to his face. The blow knocked him unconscious, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't follow it with a series of further blows that left my knuckles covered in more than just my own blood. I'd slipped, as easy as Betty Sue's knife had into my side, into the old red mist.

Betty Sue, who'd been desperately grappling with Dogulus, finally managed to free herself from his maw and, now covered with blood herself from the resultant wound, tossed him aside against a pillar. She then started to half run, half stagger deeper into the abandoned Sega warehouse, ducking under a large crate of unsold Dreamcasts and disappearing up a flight of stairs into a small interior office. "Kill Ray-Tracing!" she screamed behind her, as three more Console Gamer Collective assassins crashed in through the warehouse's filthy windows on bungee cords.

I grabbed the pummelled CGC goon's MP5 and, limping after Betty Sue, peppered the insurgents, taking one down in a hail of 9mm rounds, while the other two raced after me and, firing, caught me in the thigh. As I crashed to the gantry, though, I twisted and shot at the linkage of the crane holding the crate of consoles. It exploded under the barrage and sent the crate plunging down onto the CGC operatives' heads, crushing them.

I crashed through the office's door to find Betty Sue leaning against its rear window, one hand pressed to the glass for support, gazing out over the warehouse below. I could see she was now bleeding profusely. "Dick, we've gotta stop meeting like this," she greeted me faintly, before slowly turning. "I've seen things you wouldn't believe on PC, Dick. SLI rigs on fire running Crysis at max settings. I watched path-traced beams of light glitter in the dark of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s Night City. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die. Tell my mother I love her." And, as Betty Sue raised my revolver to her temple, I once again saw, for a flickeringly brief moment, the hopeful young PC gamer from her mother's photo. And then she fired.

CASE CLOSED

...UNTIL NOV 07



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